

喬林 知

Tomo Takabayashi Presents

砂は ミのつく 途の先!

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角川ビーンズ文庫

Kyou Kara Maou - Volume 14

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Novel Illustrations

Prologue



Junior, I have to explain this here, lest you misunderstand.

Sunglasses are not for decoration.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

砂は
マのつく
途の先!



“Wolf!?”

That is indeed his voice, and he did yell my name. But Wolf said the voice he heard wasn't mine, but someone else's.

“Are you okay? Tell me, quick, where are you hurt!?”

I try to confirm his injury with him again, after all I was the one who hurt him.

Crouching down, Wolfram makes a short grunt and then stands up forcefully with his legs. He desperately stretches his previously bent back, pushing away my

hand with all his strength. I hurriedly chase his shadow, coming to the spot underneath the bright sunlight shining down from the surface.

“Wait a sec, Wolf, where are you hurt...”

I reach out my left hand to touch what feels like a body, and feel something like torn cloth and animal fur. My thumb and index fingers are moist and warm, when I rub them it even feels a little sticky.

“I’m sorry, really...”

Wolf tries to step back from me, and I quickly grab his waist, pulling him to me. Hugging him tightly with my right arm, I press my left palm to his stomach—The warmth from his skin spreads over to me, a numbing pain climbing up my arm at the same time.

I was healed this way a few times before, as long as I do exactly as I remember, I should be able to heal others too. After all Gisela and Anissina taught me before, too, and I successfully did it last time, right?

“Stop!”

I’m pushed away forcefully, falling onto my butt on the hard floor, only managing to prop up my upper half with my hands.

“...Wolf?”

“Don’t touch me!”

Of course I can’t see his expression, and can only rely on my hearing to tell, but the emotion that comes through his voice, is very obviously anger.

He’s standing in a spot with light, so I can see his shadow clearer. Although it’s not the honey color that I see when I can see completely clearly, there’s still a golden glimmer around him that’s different from the surroundings. His own body looks like a dirty grey, though, so I can tell that he’s wearing something he rarely does. That might very well be the reason I mistook him for the enemy.

“Sorry, I was wrong. I never thought it would be you.”

Another black shadow falls to the ground blurrily. No, rather than say he fell, he should have slid down using the rope, it’s just that the rope is too thin for me to see.

“Yuuri!”

It’s Conrad’s voice, and so panicked it doesn’t sound like the usual him. He walks past Wolfram, who’s standing in place, and approaches me, on the ground, even crouching down according to my eye level. Perfect, now I can heal Wolfram’s injury.



“Conrad, you’re just in time, Wolf is pretty badly hurt, press him down while I’m healing him.”

“Wolfram is fine, it’s just a small wound on his clothes and abdomen, thankfully he had an amulet with him, so the wound isn’t deep, not so bad that he has to trouble Your Majesty to heal him.”

“But he lost so much blood.”

“That’s your blood.”

“Eh?”

“Your palm is wounded, and that’s not all.”

He grabs my shoulder a little roughly, and a sharp pain immediately runs down my right side, until I can’t help but yelp. After a short apology, he instantly reduces the force he’s using, but his voice is still very stiff.

“This is?”

“What...”

Conrad doesn’t wait for my reply, shouting,

“Sizemore!”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

Another shadow drops down to join us, now there is twice the number of people underground.

The large shadow moving in a fluster, should be Captain Sizemore. His ancestors never thought that, as a tribe who made a living on the sea, he would one day be called to this kind of sand-strewn lands. After all, this is an area he can’t show off his talents at all.

“His Majesty is hurt, do you have any cloth that can be used as a bandage? Also...”

Conrad orders Sizemore,

“Arrest him immediately.”

The shadow that looks like the Captain stops abruptly, revealing his confusion with the question, “Arrest who?”

“Lord von Bielefeld. He hurt His Majesty, we mustn’t let him approach His Majesty.”

Now it’s my turn to panic.

“Wait a sec! You misunderstood, Conrad! This is a misunderstanding!”

“No matter what the reason, it’s a fact that Wolfram hurt you with a sword, this is an unforgivable crime. Haven’t you noticed the pain in your right shoulder?”

Once he says that, I finally remember that the two of us were at each other’s throats just a while ago. At the same time I grabbed the blade with my hand, the other person was holding a broken sword, so that’s how both of us ended injured.

“Didn’t you hear me?”

Lord Weller repeats his order to a helpless Sizemore, and the only result is the Captain’s already balding hair falls out some more.

Because now there are two people giving orders.

“Of course he^[1] heard you!”

Wolfram must have been waving his hand as he spoke, because I feel a breeze brush past my face. Wonderful, his movements are no different than usual, and his voice is powerful too, I can’t help but heave a sigh of relief.

“Don’t be mistaken, Lord Weller. They are Shin Makoku soldiers, and will not obey your orders. Sizemore, you don’t have to arrest me, but from now on you must keep a watch on me, if I try to approach His Majesty then you must do everything to stop me, even if it means using force, understand?”

Apparently I’m not the only one who feels relieved. No matter how loyal a soldier, they like orders that are easy to accomplish. Captain Sizemore’s voice has also become obviously lighter,

“I just have to stop you? But Your Excellency, why...”

This part is particularly vexing, to me as well.

“You don’t have to know the reason.”

“Wait a sec! Wolf, what do you mean by keep a watch? What do you mean, you can’t approach me? More importantly, why are you here, come on and explain to me! How will I know anything if you don’t tell me!?”

“Why am I here?”

Wolfram can’t approach me, but there’s amusement in his voice when he talks. But that isn’t self-jest or embarrassment, much less joy. If I had to describe it, that should be pride, right?

“Staying by Your Majesty’s side, isn’t that my duty?”

“This...”

“That’s why I came to find you.”

I want to see his expression so bad, to see what kind of attitude he said that line with. Surely he must have his arms over his chest, his body tilted back slightly, even looking down on me with his chin raised.

“Is that so? So you came to look for me, thank you.”

But I lost my rational mind, mistaking him for an enemy and even hurting, it’s only natural that he would be mad, I can’t even blame him if he starts hating me for it.

Just then another new figure complete ignores my surprise and the current atmosphere, falling down with a speed that makes one wonder, ‘Did he really use the rope?’ With a ‘thunk’ he hits the ground waist first, yelling out exaggeratedly,

“U-ha! Ow--! I’ll explain, let me explain!”

“Dacascos?”

Actually I didn’t recognize him by his voice, but by his head—that sunlight-reflecting, sparkling head.

“Your Majesty, let me explain briefly. His Excellency Wolfram and His Excellency Günter both volunteered to look for Your Majesty, but since His

Excellency Gunter was so worried for Your Majesty, he kept leaking sticky Gün-juices, so there was no way to determine a winner~~”

“Dacascos, cut the nonsense! Hurry up and get clean cloth and water to help bandage Yuuri’s wound.”

“Wolf, you too.”

I reach my hand out towards Wolfram’s back, to be precise, towards the shadow I decide is his back, and of course I can’t reach.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to touch you, but your wound must be healed! Don’t underestimate it just because it’s not deep! Where’s Gisela? Didn’t Gisela come?”

“About that, Your Majesty...”

Dacascos rubs his head awkwardly—It’s because his sparkly head got dimmer, so I could immediately tell the action he’s doing.

“Although Sergeant did cross the sea to get here, but her maryoku is too strong, so it’s not convenient for her to come to land.”

“Wait a sec, you said ‘cross the sea’? You guys actually managed to get past such strong storms?”

“Oh~~ That’s because Captain Mountain Range and Terine-shan...”

According to Captain Sizemore and Dacascos, they seem to have used another route quite a distance away from the normal way to reach Seisakoku. That’s the route smugglers and pirates used in the path, and so it’s also called the Golden Road or the Pirate’s Sea Road. But this route requires navigating past intricate islands and currents, and so needs experienced seafaring skills, so they must have overcome that with the skills and will of Sizemore, master of the sea. In my heart I’m also wondering how Shin Makoku’s ‘Find Me Team’ knew about such a mysterious route...

“It seems Captain Mountain Range’s grandfather or great-grandfather was a pi... No, an unofficial merchant, and Terine-shan was by his side the whole time, so it memorized the route.”

“I see, so his ancestor isn’t Mountain Range, but Pirate King^[2].”

“That’s how we managed to arrive at the secret port on the north-west part of this continent, finding horses there and sending people out in all direction to search, luckily only our team here found Your Majesty. Oh dear—How very lucky! All this is thanks to the guidance of His Excellency Günter’s curse.”

“Hold on hold on, there’s something I can’t pretend I didn’t hear, what do you mean by ‘Gunter’s curse’? Don’t tell me Günter cursed me? He didn’t throw the kitten into the pot, did he? But Gwendal should have stopped him... Ow!”

After confirming the wound on my palm, Conrad starts bandaging it forcefully, so all the flesh in my palm is instantly squeezed together, even bleeding a little... Although I can’t see, that’s how it feels like.

“Please bear it a little before the wound closes up, although your shoulder is banged up pretty badly, but the wound shouldn’t have reached the bone. Alright, whatever you want to say next can wait until we reach the surface, Hazel and the others should have started worrying about how to deal with the luggage too.”

It’s only when I hear ‘luggage’ that I remember, Saralegui who was packed and wrapped in a sack is still on the surface. Other than my palm and shoulder, now my head starts hurting too, and when I hear Dacascos asking in an innocently oblivious tone what’s in the sack, my head hurts even more. I just ignore his question, standing up slowly along the stone wall. Just as I think, ‘Crap, my condition ain’t good’, I realize that my legs are fine. No problem, I can still stand, and I can walk.

“If it’s okay with you, please allow me to carry you on my back... Your Majesty?”

“Eh? Oh~~ Mn.”

I hear them hurrying me, so I walk until I’m underneath the hole, but as I advance, my gaze is still trained on the pitch black tunnel ahead. Of course I don’t want to stay here, but I don’t want to leave just like that either, so even though I know I can’t see, I’m still staring at the pitch black cave.

“Yuuri.”

“...I know.”

Of course I know, my comrade can't possibly come back, and 'he' won't be happy either. But if I leave him alone in the darkness just like this, I really don't know how to calm down my own emotions.

I even think of his body, it's just that the fearsome noun scares me. Because I obviously refused to believe that he's dead, so that makes me start hating the I who accepts this reality.

Conrad knows what I'm thinking, saying to me softly,

"I won't let him sleep on this land."

"Really?"

"We always try our best to send our comrades' ^[3] bodies back to their homeland, to the hometown he acknowledged. It's just that we can't do that immediately, right now."

I hope that the place he acknowledged as his hometown, is by my side.

Travelling in the desert is really very tough.

Just like a kindergartener carrying a cloth doll backpack, I'm tied to Conrad's back, and finally return to the surface I missed so much. The unsheltered sunlight is a huge torture on my weakened vision, even after a few minutes of adjusting, the surroundings are still foggy.

But being unable to withstand the blinding sunlight is a pretty good excuse. Rather than letting everyone accept the fact that my eyes can't see, it's better to let them think I can't get used to the bright environment for now. After all I... we spent nearly a week in absolute darkness, not only can our eyes not withstand the sun's rays, our stomachs are also so hungry they're stuck to our backs, and our stamina is terrible, so much so we can't ride a horse alone.

So behind me is Sizemore, sitting with his body pencil-straight.

His arms are at a ninety degree angle, his straight upper body looking as though someone stuffed a baseball bat down his back. Since he said "Being able to ride together on the same horse with Your Majesty, is my honor!" in the

beginning, we haven't found much in common to talk about. I'm embarrassed to put all my body weight on his nervous and stiff body, so in the end I'm still relying on my own strength to hold up my body.

There's a way to sleep even on horseback, that should be a certain someone's lie.

Even though I'm exhausted I can't rely on Wolfram, after all he's injured too, right now it's probably all he can do to take care of himself.

Although he keeps insisting to his brother that it's a light injury, but a soldier's idea of a light injury is different from a sportsman's. To us baseball boy, a sprain that takes three weeks to heal is already a fairly serious injury. A sword stab to the stomach is basically throwing away the entire ball season, so serious it will seriously let down all the fans.

As for Conrad, he's riding with the blindfolded Saralegui. Although he's now in a truce with Shin Makoku... I should say, with me, he's still Dai Shimaron's emissary on the surface. Taking his position into account, he's the best candidate to take care of the Shou Shimaron king.

But Saralegui is really impressive too. Even though we tied his hem to the saddle, and blindfolded him under the pretense of protecting his eyes, but he's not scared or angry in the slightest, even leaning his entire body on Conrad and sleeping.

"Rather than say he's sleeping soundly, he's so deep asleep he might as well be dead. I think he won't wake up even if he falls off the horse."

So says Dacascos, astonished.

After they found out what's in the sack, not just the people from Seisakoku, even those from Shin Makoku were completely taken aback. Amongst them, Ajira-san the translator's expression changed drastically, and he even wanted to run from the scene... Okay, that's what I think happened, after all while I held my breath, all I heard was the sound of kicking sand.

Even if we explain that this person is not the Emperor of Seisakoku Yelshi, and is instead his twin brother Saralegui, we still can't convince the rebels. Once his older brother knows about the secret organization, the underground resistance

will be in great danger. At first we wanted to tell them Saralegui's eyes have already been blindfolded, but they went ten horses ahead of us ages ago, refusing to come any closer no matter what.

"Aren't you tired, Your Majesty?"

Only Hazel Graves would occasionally bring her horse to the group in the back.

"I'm okay, Sara is probably fine too. It's as you see it."

"Mn—He seems to be super relaxed."

Seems so, because I can hear his snoring from here.

"If we continue ahead for a while there should be an oasis, for now we can only pray that this map is correct."

"Can the people in the front tell which direction they're advancing in?"

"If we had a magnetic mineral stone, at least we could use it as a compass. Compared to sewing, since young I've always been better at making tools. It's just that I'm not sure if the direction it points at is the same as on Earth."

"I see."

Because the Captain's compass needle is swinging left and right behind my head, I can't help but wonder how she knows where we are now in this vast and empty desert.

"On the other hand, Your Majesty, there's something bothering me."

Hazel suddenly lowers her voice, and my heart grows nervous accordingly.

"The few people in the front, plus the Captain-san and Baldy-san here, they're all Your Majesty's men, right?"

"That's right."

"And that one who's angry because his stomach got hurt, the handsome guy that looks like a fairy tale prince, he is too?"

"Mn, actually he is a prince."

"In that case, he's Your Majesty's brother from a different mother or something like that?"

“No, no, he’s the son of the previous Queen.”

“Eh? Shin Makoku isn’t patrimonial? Even though it’s a kingdom, it’s full of wonders.”

I don’t mention that Wolfram is Conrad’s brother, because that will only complicate things further.

“But when we were surrounded by the equestrian people, they showed up so suddenly and in such a cool way, I’m really very grateful, because he’s practically like a Prince Charming... True, he is indeed a real prince. And then Lord Weller is the Little Buddy’s... Your Majesty’s bodyguard, right?”

“Ah—About that... More or less, I guess—”

“They’re all Your Majesty’s men, so why don’t PRINCE and Lord Weller seem to get along?”

Ah~~ So that’s it, that’s what she wanted to ask? I heave a sigh of relief, deciding to set Hazel’s username for Wolf as PRINCE.

“They actually get along very well, just like real brothers.”

I should say, they are brothers to start with.

“So what is PRINCE so unhappy about, why is he so angry?”

“Maybe because I injured him.”

“What!?”

Hazel nearly yells out loud, then she quickly lowers her voice, putting her hand on my uninjured shoulder, caressing it a few times as though comforting me.

“Something happened while you were underground, right? Such as you started fighting your own, or tried to kill each other.”

Behind me, Sizemore’s body is getting stiffer and stiffer, we’re talking in a language he doesn’t understand, and even having bodily contact, so naturally he would be at a loss for what to do.

But Hazel doesn’t seem to worry about all that, continuing to talk to me, and in a quiet, steady voice, as though talking to herself,

“Listen up, Little Buddy, no matter what happened in that underground

tunnel, it's not your fault, and not anyone else's fault, either. That is an evil place, scary things happen there. Tragedies will happen there, that seem to tear apart your heart, and leave deep wounds. So no matter what you do, never blame yourself, it's not Little Buddy's fault, and it's no one's fault."

"Hazel."

"If you have to say, the people who built that kind of place long, long ago are to blame, in other words those guys who built the tunnel to the royal tombs. That place is full of evil intention, the tombs continuously emitting the curse of their entire clan towards the world. Precisely because they built a tunnel to the royal tombs, that's why those kinds of tragedies happen."

"Hazel... Hazel Graves, what's the matter with you?"

I search for the silhouette of Hazel Graves in the middle of my blurry vision. I reach my hand out for the figure that's slightly blocking the sunlight, although I can touch her with my fingertips, because we're both on horseback, my fingers rub her face even if I don't move at all."

"That's not like something an experienced adventurer would say, I never thought you would say something so unscientific."

"...Your Majesty, it's exactly because I'm an adventurer that I say that. No matter how unscientific, seeing is believing. Everything you see will happen, no matter how illogical—It is just that kind of place."

"When you say 'illogical', exactly how illogical..."

"Like impossible images, or comrades dying for impossible reasons etc."

The skin I touch, is so dry it doesn't even feel like a woman's anymore, carved with deep wrinkles. Back when my eyes could see, she was so energetic and robust, but now she's aged until she's practically a different person.

"But that's not your fault, Your Majesty. Never blame yourself."

Suddenly I feel that's she old and small, and the corners of my eyes grow warm. Hazel Graves spent her life, very long by Earth standards, here in this land where there's only yellow sand.

Only her alone.

People call her Venera.

“Did you tell anyone else about the same thing?”

“You mean about the underground passage?”

“Yes, Hazel.”

The face and chin in front of my fingers move from left to right.

“No, I never told anyone. Because as far as I know, no one will go in there.”

“Who would have thought I’m the only one.”

From not far away there’s a call of “Your Majesty?”, and also “Yuuri—”

“So only I experienced the same thing you did.”

My hand moves down to her chin along her face, past her neck and chest, exploring downwards blindly. Maybe she can’t stand my clumsiness, because Hazel takes my hand on her own accord.

“If so, I’m also the only one who can say this.”

She grips my hand tightly, with a palm smaller and fingers thinner than when I could see.

“Hazel, that isn’t anyone’s fault.”

In that moment it’s like I could see again, at the same time it felt as though I could hear someone saying something. That voice doesn’t go through my ears, but comes out from my throat, resounding in my head directly before the words leave my mouth.

That person is telling a tall figure, “This isn’t your fault.”

I even thought that this is the same as before when I was underground, a long dream, but the illusion disappears in a second, all I see now is the shape of Hazel’s face. Beyond that is a blur of yellow sand and sunlight merging.

I rub my eyes with my bandaged left hand, my right hand holding Hazel’s again.

“But I have to thank you, Hazel. I will try my best not to blame myself, and convince myself to think that way.”

“Perfect, looks like my words still have some use after all. Then I need to go

back now, abandoning them in the front like that is really very pitiful.”

Hazel Graves speeds up her horse and catches up with the group ahead, I dazedly stare at the pale brown slowly goes into the distance, approaching a patch of similar color.

She never once mentioned Josak’s name, or asked about his whereabouts. I’m afraid she already noticed, is this the so-called ‘samurai’s compassion’?

“What is it, Your Majesty? Did that woman say something to displease you?”

“Eh? Why would you say so?”

Sizemore drops his arms, finally relaxed, scratching at his receding hair,

“This is very hard to say, but it feels like... she keeps making Your Majesty yawn.”

“Yawn... Ah!”

Sometimes it’s very hard to understand a rough and tough soldier when he tries to say something subtly. Maybe it’s because I was a bit rough rubbing my eyes just now, so my eyes turned red, or maybe some sand got into them and so I teared up.

But before trying to explain, I really want to yawn. The oxygen hasn’t even reached my brain yet, and my mouth is already wide open.

“Sorry, I want to take a nap. I can’t stand it anymore, after this I may keep on sleeping.”

“Ah!? You want to sleep here!?”

“That’s right, Captain. Hasn’t the Shou Shimaron king already proven that you can sleep while riding a horse?”

Anyway that guy must be all over Conrad, snoring, right? And I’m sure he’s not dreaming.

Whatever, I’m exhausted, so tired my body feels like a puddle of mud, and can fall off the horse whenever.

“Call me when we reach the oasis.”

I don’t care, even if I fall there’s sand underneath me, and even if I do fall to

the ground, someone will pick me up.

I'm not alone in the pitch black darkness anymore.

References

1. [↑](#) For this part there's no pronoun, lit. 'How could (he) not have heard you!', except it could be he, we or even I. Sort of implying everyone heard the order, though this way it's not clear who (Wolfram thinks) Conrad is addressing.
2. [↑](#) Reference to One Piece, lol
3. [↑](#) lit. friends in war, brothers in arms *etc.* Different from when Yuuri uses it

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

At first I thought we would have more water than we could drink, and more food than we could eat once we reached the oasis, plus more baths than we could ever take, only to get there and realize that nothing is as I expected.

After we cross the white sand dune, the water source immediately enters our eyes.

Considering it's a water source in the desert, you could say this place is both vast and lush, almost the same size as a lake. The overflowing fresh water gets darker in color as it gets closer to the center, and it's very clear, so much so you could clearly see the pebbles under the water when you stand by the bank.

Since I can still only see light and shadows, and I can't distinguish colors, Captain Sizemore is the one who told me all that from behind me. He still thinks my vision is so bad because I suddenly saw sunlight.

"Your Majesty, there is indeed a lake here, we should add it onto our country's maps."

"Captain, we can talk about the maps later. As long as I can drink and bathe, I don't care if it's a lake or river."

From the rustling of the leaves in the wind and the swaying shadows, I can tell that there are a lot of trees here.

"And there are people staying here, too. Rather than say it's a water source, it'd be better to call it a town."

"Seems so."

But what's bothering us is that although there are houses here, there's no sense of any people at all. Maybe it's because we're still very far away, but not only can't we hear any talking sounds, we can't even hear approaching footsteps, could this be an GHOST TOWN?

Maybe he noticed my suspicions, because Conrad rides his horse to my side,

"These aren't ruins, you know? There are even newly-built houses here."

"Everything looks white to me, what is this town made of? Stones?"

"They should be bricks made of mud and animal feces then dried in the sun, they look considerably sturdy too. As for the lake... Ah, yes, it should be a quarter of the size of Fenway Park^[1], surrounded by 25 to 30 buildings around the sides. There doesn't seem to be special buildings like a church or shops, but this many buildings is already sufficient for a town and relay point. Oh, yeah!"

There's laughter in his breathing.

"There are a lot of clothes hanging out to dry, so it shows that the people here have benefited greatly from the water. It's strange that there's not a single person out, though, since it's obviously still quite some time before nightfall."

"What are you saying? Ah, that's right, you're explaining these sights to your blind master, right?"

Saralegui, finally awake, speaks with a volume everyone can hear. Dacascos takes a while but he manages to catch up to us, asking worriedly, "You still can't see?"

But Saralegui's will is really scary. Even though he's been blindfolded, and his movements restricts, he doesn't seem uneasy or dejected at all, instead he's extremely interested in his current situation.

Who would have thought his fantasy-like looks hid such thick skin? I've been completely duped by him, to the point where even I am surprised by my own stupidity.

In front of Conrad, the Shou Shimaron boy king straightens up unnaturally, maybe he uses his shoulders and arms to get rid of the blindfold, because I can feel his golden eyes looking at me.

"Good morning, Your Majesty Saralegui. You seem to have slept well."

"Exactly right, Your Majesty Yuuri. Lord Weller's chest is so comfortable to sleep on, how I envy you for having such a wonderful subordinate. But he's Dai Shimaron's emissary, right? In that case, why would he obey your orders while we were underground? Do you have some secret pact with Dai Shimaron?"

“There’s no such thing.”

“Is that so? But you’re too smart, I find that very hard to believe.”

I knew a long time ago that his tongue is deadly poisonous, so I can’t let him rile me up.



Before I start feeling unhappy, I need to think happy thoughts—like water, food,

baths. This is just as I thought, there's enough water for me to bathe. I turn back and tell Sizemore in a purposefully bright voice,

"Captain, since there's no danger, let's enter the town. Where are Wolfram and the others? Hazel and Ajira-san should have arrived already too, and it's very weird that there isn't a single person in town... Don't tell me..."

"Y-Your Majesty, 'don't tell me' what?"

Sparkly Dacascos asks timidly. It's okay now that there's still sunlight, but once night falls, I'm no confident I can recognize him.

"Don't tell me some scary dinosaur or huge squid ate everyone in town?"

"I-in this calm-looking lake!?"

"Your Majesty, squids are saltwater animals. And if the people were all eaten, there wouldn't be so many freshly-washed clothes, right?"

"G-good point."

I struggled but got off the horse, walking towards the patch of aqua blue. If I'm scared because I can't see, I may not dare to put even one foot forward. But I still stretch my arms out, so that I don't trip over any obstacles and fall. If someone else saw me, they might probably think I'm a zombie. Honestly, right now I really feel extremely embarrassed, no matter what I won't let my beloved daughter see me like this.

The cold breeze blowing across the surface of the lake reaches my face and neck, and the white shirt I borrowed blows in the wind as well.

As I walk on the little path between the houses to reach the waterfront, the feeling underneath my feet immediately changes. That feeling is different from the solid hard ground, so soft people might mistake it for a beach. I hear footsteps on the wet sand behind me, and know that Conrad is following closely behind me.

"It's water."

Although I'm not so thirsty anymore, the painful memories from my time underground still makes me kneel by the water. The cool water laps over my fingers, buried in the sand, then recedes.

“It’s water, Conrad, there’s actually so much water.”

“A priceless treasure in the desert.”

When I bring my face to the surface, there’s a freshwater smell different from that of seawater. It's freshwater and a whole lot of it.

And it’s precisely then, that I sense for the first time that there are people in the town.

A door opens and closes roughly, and I hear a man giving a panicked warning,

“Yuuri you can’t, the water has been polluted!”

“Wolfram?”

Before I can raise my head, someone’s already pulled me up by the collar, what a close call.

“You said polluted?”

What a rare word in this world.

Even if he says this water has been polluted, it looks very fresh and clear. It even smells like mineral water.

Wolfram pulls my hand and brings me into a building, it looks like the Seisakoku resistance led by Hazel and the four Shin Makoku soldiers Sizemore brought are all here.

“Why does everyone look so serious?”

Dacascos asks, all carefree, and Hazel doesn’t answer him, instead calling out to me,

“Your Majesty.”

Since the room is slightly dim, I can’t tell where she is, so I have to deduce her position from her voice.

“I heard, Hazel. What’s the matter, what do you mean by polluted?”

“You didn’t drink the water, did you?”

“I almost did. But it smells and feels normal, why would you say it’s polluted?”

Could this be Shocker's [\[2\]](#) doing?"

Shocker is an organization Murata really admires. It seems they sometimes poison Tama Lake [\[3\]](#), and sometimes release a poisonous gas that strips people of their motivation to work, sort of like the Poison Lady of Earth. If Shocker doesn't show up in the weekly must-watch episode of Kamen Rider, Murata will sigh dejectedly.

"Someone put a houjutsu on the water, and a tricky houjutsu too."

"They polluted the water with houjutsu--!?"

The image of water pollution in my head immediately shatters with a crash. The original images were—stiff like colorful industrial waste from factories, or thick smog from tall chimneys, or the water surface being dyed never-before-seen colors, with countless fish floating belly up, and then scary poison monsters claw apart the mud and appear *etc.* And some chemicals mixing in the water, to cause mutations in the fish!

"W-where are the half fish people?"

Conrad purposely clears his throat,

"Your Majesty, in order to protect their good name, let me explain, the maidmer always stay in clean seas."

"Ah, sorry... But Hazel, you said houjutsu pollution, so you mean that although this is such a large lake, not a single drop of water inside can be drunk?"

"Apparently it can only be used to clean."

Oh, that's why they gave up on everything, and washed a ton of clothes.

"So all the people left the town of their own accord, and moved to another place?"

"No, most of them are still staying here. After all abandoning their hometown and moving far away is full of obstacles, and they need to protect the water source generations of their ancestors left behind. You see, they're desperately doing this kind of work, just like that."

There's the sound of rubbing hinges, they probably opened the door of the

next house, it's just that in the dim room, I still can't tell what's in front of me.

"I see~~ They split a large water trough into two halves, one above the other, and connected them using a thin pipe in the middle. The trough on top is half-filled with water, sand, crushed pebbles and dead leaves, but the bottom trough is almost completely empty, who would have thought that was to catch the water dripping through the pipe. In other words this is a Seisakoku-style water filter? But waiting for one drop of water is already taking so long I want to fall asleep, and who are these four shinzokus staring at the apparatus unblinkingly? Hazel?"

Conrad, thank you for that explanation that's as detailed as an educational program, I will never forget your great kindness.

It's thanks to his appropriate descriptions that I come up with the image of a factory manufacturing make-up for different ages in my head. And every time she sees those ads, Mom will start fussing over whether or not she should buy those make-up products.

"These four seem to be performing purification houjutsu, to make the polluted water drinkable. The other remaining residents are also doing the same thing, but it's hard enough to purify enough drinking water for all these families. It takes so long, no wonder they can't accumulate any pure water."

"I see, so this is simple filtration... Ah, using houjutsu to purify the water, right? And it takes so long I almost fall asleep to purify a few drops, what an inefficient task."

"But they still have to purify drinking water, and even save some for passing travelers like us."

"So they're not only purifying water for themselves to drink, how noble of them."

"We got here first, so we discussed it over with them, to see if they could spare us some drinking water. Because we really need water whether we're going forward or back, but it seems they can't provide enough water to let us all continue on our journey. After all, accumulating some takes several days already.

"I think so too, after all they have to purify one drop at a time."

I place my hand on my forehead and look upwards, the wound under the bandage throbbing. Is there any more efficient way, to filter a lot of water at once?

“Aah, I thought of something good! I once saw in a creepy magazine, you can use the power of the pyramid! Just make a pyramid-shaped rack like this, and the water in the cup you put inside will become very tasty. And if you put old milk inside, it’ll even become natto.”

“What did you say!? Animal milk can turn into rotten beans!?”

“Ah, sorry, my mistake. The milk becomes yogurt, and beans become natto.”

Sizemore heaves a long sigh of relief. Wait a sec, if this theory is correct, the power of the pyramid only makes food rot.... No no no, not rot, I mean ferment. But what happens after such important water ferments, is beyond me. If Murata were here, he would definitely answer immediately.

“What about we just build a pyramidal structure over the lake? Maybe this way can even restore the polluted surroundings to normal. Ah~~ But where do we find the materials? Captain, could you get us a bamboo stick that can be adjusted so that they can become really long?”

“But Your Majesty, even if you restore the whole lake, there’s no point if they use the same houjutsu on it again.”

I exclaim “Ah!” and then shut up. Hazel’s right, there’s no point if we don’t treat the root of the problem. Speaking of which, who polluted the lake with houjutsu and why? First we need to understand the whole story.

“Apparently two tribes of equestrian people are warring over this water source, and one side used the polluting houjutsu to be able to monopolize the water.”

“When you say equestrian people, do you mean those guys who attacked you on the surface?”

“Those guys were one of the tribes as well.”

“I see, the equestrian people are shinzoku too, no wonder they can use houjutsu—”

I heard before that in the desert lands in the north, there are a few tribes of equestrian people fighting for domination in the name of protecting the royal tombs, but I never heard that they would even fight over a precious water source.

“Mn—Since they will surround us out of nowhere, and aim crossbows at us, there’s no point in asking us to undo the curse, either.

In a time like this, we could really use Poison Lady's help. If Miss Anissina was here, she would help invent many things like a ‘Nullification-kun’ that reflects all unreasonable curses and houjutsu, or something convenient like ‘Drinking Elephant No. 3’ that can instantly purify any polluted water through its long nose.

This kind of situation sure is upsetting, like a well-timed safe hit that never comes, when you don’t need her you see the Poison Lady everywhere.

“About that—At times like this shouldn’t we ask what houjutsu is it first? Maybe they’ll tell us if they’re in a good mood.”

“Who do you want to ask!?”

Those words make me turn around despite myself, but Dacascos just stands there wordlessly. I’m about to ask why isn’t he reacting, but it turns out to be a language barrier—because I accidentally asked him in English.

This sort of international group is really so confusing. For example, Conrad, Hazel and I are talking in English; Hazel and her comrades as using the Seisakoku language; while I use the common language with the mazokus. So three languages cross over now, Ajira-san acting as the translator between Seisakoku and the common language, Hazel for Seisakoku and English, Conrad and I for English and the common language... It’s getting messier and messier.

When talking to Dacascos, only the common language goes.

“Dacascos, who do you want to ask?”

“The houjutsu user who did this, of course. Since it’s his houjutsu, he should know how to break it, right?”

“Could he possibly be that friendly—They didn’t hesitate to pollute the oasis

everyone relied on for their own profit, y'know? Besides we don't even know where they are, and there are a lot of people in the equestrian tribes, so we have no idea of finding out which one it is."

Ajira-sa understand us, interrupting,

"Location, know."

After that, Hazel who knows the inside information tells us what Ajira wants to say in English,

"In the past we found out where the equestrian people live through the residents in town. One side lives a day's trip by horse north-east, the other is half a day away towards the north-north-west. There are other small tribes too, but their people aren't as aggressive as these two."

"But even if we got there, we can't know which of them used the pollution houjutsu, right? Sorry, I meant even if we found that person, would the other party let us meet him so easily? For all you know he could be purposely hidden up, after all he's an important ace~~"

"Hmph, if it was up to me, I'd give up this place and go to the next water source to stock up on our drinking water. Are there any other water sources ahead?"

"Map, there is not"

"There might be small-scale wells, but the map doesn't go that detailed. Even if we rely on the map, it would be no use if we wander aimlessly."

"But Your Majesty—"

Conrad says in the common language Captain Sizemore and Wolfram can understand,

"If there was a viable water source ahead, the equestrian tribes wouldn't need to use houjutsu on this lake in order to monopolize it, right?"

"You have a point... This should be the only important stronghold... Mn?"

"Yuuri, what is it?"

"Hold on a sec."

I keep musing over my words, trying desperately to gather some inspiration. There's no water source ahead, this town and lake is an important stronghold, we might not find the houjutsu user even if we get to the equestrian tribe's base...

"Hazel."

Just in case, I call her in English. Although I don't know what level my English is, it's okay as long as Hazel and Conrad can understand me.

"What is it?"

"You patrolled this area before we arrived here, right?"

The grey head moves from left to right, but she also admits in a low voice, meaning I was right.

"Did you discover any equestrian people around here? Even if it's one or two of them, whether they're drinking in a bar or saying some annoying rude things to girls?"

"No, as far as I know there's not even one."

"Since this is an important stronghold, why is there not even one of the most basic lookouts?"

"Hng-hng~~" Hazel laughs with her nose,

"That is indeed unbelievable. If they were pretending to be residents and hiding in some house then that would be another matter."

"That's right, as long as they blend in with the locals, we won't be able to recognize them, and we couldn't find them even if we wanted to. Oh, yeah, Conrad, from your point of view, they shouldn't have any large scale water sources, right?"

"That is merely my outsider opinion."

He's really too humble. Since he's an experienced veteran warrior, and at the same time a seasoned traveler, he can't possibly be an outsider to geography and traps. Plus he gained a lot of experience on Earth as well, if someone tells me he joined a merchant team crossing the Sahara Desert, I wouldn't be surprised.

“If that’s so, they should really need the water here. Once they need water, what do you think they would do?”

“The equestrian people from north-north-west come here regularly for water, apparently, and the houjutsu user seems to be from this tribe as well. So they probably have a houjutsu user that can control the water quality.”

As I thought. But even if we go over, we might not necessarily find that houjutsu user... That way we can’t do anything.

No matter which field you’re in, there will be people like those who check out their love rivals or ball scouts. Once they go back to base and report what they find, those with more power will show up. Since the other side can be carefree and wait patiently, then they might also rush here to grab the upper hand.

Once I think of that, I can’t hide the smile in the corners of my mouth anymore.

“Then let him come to us.”

If right now the rumor gets out that a super strong helper came to the town, and became a new source of power, what would happen?

Since that person purified the polluted lake water, the equestrian people won’t be able to monopolize the water source either. Once they get wind of this, the equestrian tribe in the north-north-west would surely rush over here, and they would definitely send the houjutsu user who can control the water quality to recast the houjutsu.

Perfect~~ Then we just wait for them to rush over here in a frenzy.

“That’s why we need a pigeon to fly from one of the family’s drawers.”

Wolfram can’t stand my mumbling, retorting,

“Yuuri, even if ‘Pigeon Mail’ services go all over the world, they shouldn’t have a branch in Seisakoku, right?”

That’s right, it’s true we don’t have pigeons.

References

1. [↑](#) A baseball park located in Boston, Massachusetts, considered to be one of the most well-known sports venues in the world.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fenway_Park)
2. [↑](#) An evil organization that appears in the television series Kamen Rider, that planned on ruling the world with virtually all of its members modified in some way. (<http://kamenrider.wikia.com/wiki/Shocker>)
3. [↑](#) Also known as Murayama Reservoir, the manmade lake that supplies Tokyo with water.

Chapter 3

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That night, taking the place of a pigeon, a townspeople disappears from town.

Avoids everyone's eyes and ears, he takes his horse to the sand dunes while looking about warily, and then disappears from the desert—as reported by Sizemore's subordinates.

Everything's going according to plan.

The man heard the rumors I spread, and in order to report them quickly to his comrades or employer, he avoids the others here and leaves.

The travelers who came to town purified the polluted lake water. So the townspeople who no longer have to collect their drinking water drop by drop are rejoicing. These travelers have also been instantly promoted to messiahs, so now even the opposing equestrian tribe (the one is the north-east) can enjoy the ample water source

The messiah part may be a bit much, but rumors tend to get exaggerated. If so, there's no harm making it exaggerated from the start, and that can count as a compliment to ourselves.

Once these rumors reach the north-north-west tribe, they will definitely take action. After all they can't let the water source fall into enemy hands, to prevent this from happening, they need to recast the houjutsu on the lake as soon as possible.

Then it's the houjutsu user who polluted the water's turn to take the stage.

But they should first send out a smaller team of scouts, to investigate whether or not the water has actually been purified. If they really do that, it's actually better for us, we can take them on even if we are losing in firepower. Because this way the chances of a houjutsu user tagging along are also higher, and we can get a chance to catch him, then ask him the most efficient method of purification.

It takes about half a day by horse to reach the camp of the north-north-west equestrian tribe, by the time the spy who left town in the night returns with the team of scouts, it would be the next evening by the earliest.

So we have ample time to practice our strategy, and can let our bodies relax properly, finally investigating the direction they're coming in and delegate our people. We asked the townspeople for some water and food, we even asked for permission to swim in the lake, as a substitute for a bath. Although the lake water has been polluted, it can still be used to wash, so bathing is no problem, we just have to be careful not to drink any.

But swimming in weather like Seisakoku's seems to be a bit rash. At first it still feels pretty comfortable, but after a while of swimming it's so cold I shiver, and have to jump into the covers before I catch a cold.

I finally wake up at sunset, and watch Hazel and her companions, in charge of looking out, leave to rendezvous with Conrad and Sizemore's soldiers, as well as Dacascos who's in charge of miscellaneous things.

Although I say I watched them leave, it's not like I could actually see them. My vision is the same as yesterday, all a blur.

After drinking some water, eating some food, and have a nice nap on a long awaited bed, most of the weariness that I collected vanished too. Actually I know very well, the damage done to my body can't be healed immediately, but when I open my eyes in bed and see only light and shadow, I'm honestly SHOCKED.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Very well."

Although I answer the question instinctively, I had slept far from soundly. Because I had a nightmare, and kept getting woken up, returning to the same scene every time I fall asleep, until I can't help but wonder if I really like retaking exams so much.

"What about you, Wolf?"

"So-so."

"You're lying, because you snored as you always do when you're sleeping like a

log.”

“You deliberately pricked up your ears and listened out for that? What a curious baby you are, Yuuri![\[1\]](#)”

“...Even if I don’t want to hear it, I still hear it.”

Wolfram and I are in charge of controlling the large dining room that’s acting as our base of operations, in other words we’re on watch duty.

I wasn’t forced to stay behind, but did so willingly.

It can’t be helped, after all my vision now is very bad, I can only differentiate between light, shadow and a portion of colors for now, so not only can’t I move on my own, I definitely can’t protect myself in a fight with the enemy. Rather than getting in the way outside, I might as well stay in headquarters like a good boy.

Wolfram, on the other hand, stayed back to protect me. Although he acts energetic, the truth is he’s a wounded party too, and wounded in the stomach no less. The one who wounded him was me, so I really can’t make him do anything else strenuous.

What’s surprising is his reaction when he was told to stay on guard duty. Normally he would say something like “I can fight, don’t you trust me?” and then there would be a long line of protests, I was even all ready to listen to him complain, but instead Wolfram just said “I see”, completely against my expectations.

There’s one more person in the dining room, and that’s Saralegui.

But he’s staying in a private room. After the battle meeting ended, Lord Weller brought in Saralegui, who was playing with the horses outside, saying “After all milord is the king of a country, it would far too rude of us not to offer milord a private room”, and locked him inside the tool closet.

He cursed Conrad for quite some time, finally saying “I’m going to sleep!” and since then we haven’t hear a sound from him. Looks like his special technique is falling asleep within three seconds.

“Hey.”

"Seeing my body lean towards his direction, Wolfram immediately utters using a harsh tone,"

"Keep your distance, keep your distance. Don't get too close to me."

"Ahh—Okay, okay, okay, I'm forbidden within a radius of 2 meters, right?"

He hates me, even though not long ago we were so close we could stay in the same large crate.

"I say, Wolf, I want to confirm with you."

"What?"

"You... chest hair... No, actually, it's nothing. I just didn't think that you could keep growing after eighty."

That furry feeling near his chest, is actually... Honestly I really can't predict what mazoku growth is like.

"I-I'm not jealous, got it?"

"What on earth are you mumbling about?"

But we're not just supposed to talk about body hair.

"I think apologies are in order"

"You want to make me apologize here?"

"Or course not! I don't want to make you apologize~! Besides I'm not even angry, though it seems you still are... See, you won't even approach me. So I wanted to make up with you, and apologize to you first. After all I don't want this awkward atmosphere to continue anymore, and it'll be troubling to Captain Sizemore and Dacascos."

Just in case, we're sitting while leaning on a table on its side—this is to guard against any arrows coming through the entrance. Even though us two casualties are sitting two meters apart, it's still plenty wide enough, I really don't know how many people is this dining table supposed to seat.

We're not sitting on chairs, instead sitting directly on the coarse floorboards.

"It's only natural that you would hate me... We're comrades, but I caused you to get hurt. Not only that..."

I can't help but cover my mouth with my hand.

"I actually wanted to... k-kill you. Back then I really, truly, wanted to... Damn, I feel like puking."

"Hold on, other than your eyes and shoulder, are you in any pain?"

I turn my head to a side, waving my right hand next to it to gesture 'no'. Actually I'm not sick, it's just that the sudden stress and anxiety made my stomach acids flow the wrong way.

"Sorry, I'm so sorry, I never thought it could be you. I'll repent, if saying it is not enough, then I'm willing to accept any punishment to show my sincerity."

"About that, at first I wanted to deal with everything here first, and talk about it again once we safely bring the Maou back to Shin Makoku, but since you brought it up now, there's nothing I can do about it."

I can feel Wolfram looking at me as he sighs.

"If you want to, you can even sentence me to death. Not only did I point my sword at His Majesty the Maou, I even attacked you, and injured you. But I swear... I really never thought it could be you."

"Me too."

Back then, when Wolfram slid down using the rope, I had completely treated him as an enemy. When I saw his sword, shining brightly in the darkness as it reflected the sunlight, I deeply believed that person was an enemy here to kill me.

"At that moment when I saw the sword."

"All I saw was a moving figure. Back then I didn't think whether it was a friend or foe, but the moment I set foot in the dark place, my thoughts immediately became "that was an enemy, that figure is an enemy without a doubt"... And even your voice sounded like someone else..."

"Didn't you change the direction of the sword at the last moment? The sword blade suddenly went flat, that's why Conrad said I only got banged up. But I still purposely picked up the weapon, and just like that, towards your stomach... Mmgh!"

I'm talking about these things, and it hurts so bad just thinking about what happened back then.

"Are you really okay?"

I break the orders not to get close to him and approach Wolfram, carefully plastering my palm over what should be his stomach.

"Maybe my healing isn't as good as Gisela's, but it's better than not healing at all."

"Stop! Don't use majutsu!"



Wolfram immediately bats away my hand.

“Why are you such a brainless noob? This is Shinzoku land, you know!? This is the continent with houryoku so strong even Gisela couldn’t set foot here, there’s no way you don’t know the consequences of using maryoku in a place like this, right? It’s precisely because you want to use your majutsu whenever, that’s why I told you not to get near me!”

“Eh?”

“Didn’t you hear me? It’s because you like using majutsu so much, that’s why I told you not to get near me.”

No matter how I ask, the answer is the same. But it’s completely different from the reason I cracked my head to come up with.

“...So you’re not mad at me?”

His breathing is very fast.

“Of course I’m mad. Who asked you to be so rash.”

“And I thought you hated me...”

“Me, hate you?”

Helplessly, Wolfram can’t help but raise his tone at the end, so it feels about like “Me, hate you~~?”

“Could someone who hated the king possibly chase him to the ends of the earth? And...”

After that is the sound of rubbing cloth, and he pulls out something with a ‘whoosh!’ The sound is like something tied on the end of the rope.

“Carrying this strangely disgusting thing called ‘Günter’s Protection’ too.”

“Günter’s Protection~~?”

This time it’s my turn to raise my tone.

My hand touches something swaying back and forth, and looks a lot like a small pouch. Even if I stare at it unblinkingly, I can only see a grey shadow. After I confirm it with my hand, then only do I know that it’s small bag knitted from hair. Bu it feels very rough, not only aren’t the stitches not smooth there are

even many fibers poking out.

This should be the amulet Conrad mentioned before. In other words the broken blade I'd grabbed cut into this substitute.

"But is this really an amulet? Even if I want to say something nice, I still don't think it will have much effect."

"This is knitted from Günter's hair."

"Eeeeeeeek--!"

I pull my back my hand hurriedly. This should be a curse, right!?

"It seems to seal my maryoku too. Meaning as long as I have it on me, I can walk on this land full of houryoku like a normal person. It's a secret technique that has this function... Ngh... That's weird, what secret technique was it? How strange, it feels as though my memory's all fuzzy, I can't remember."

"Waa—Don't remember, you really don't have to remember."

I heard that if someone went through too big a trauma, their memories will be automatically sealed to prevent a mental breakdown.

Although I don't want to ask for the details, but since the other party is Günter, it shouldn't be anything normal.

"Anyway thank you for being willing to come look for me with an amulet made from hair, it really is an unbelievable thing."

"What thing?"

"Didn't I cut that amulet in half back then? Why is it completely back to normal now?"

"Now that you mention it..."

The room where the two of them were staying alone together is suddenly dead quiet.

There's also the world's scariest secret technique with them, and the amulet that regenerates (made completely from pure hair).

"I-I still don't think this protects from anything... There couldn't be a curse inside, could there?"

“Don’t know, I don’t know. If you’re so concerned about it, put your hand inside and see.”

“Me!? Put it into this thing!?”

The thing in front of me, no matter what I can’t call it anything lucky. Maybe it’s just me being sensitive, but I keep feeling as though not only that bag, but the surrounding atmosphere has turned very dark as well.

“No, I politely refuse... Waa--!”

Wolfram says I can’t get close to him, but he grabs my left hand and reaches it into the bag, using his sonorous voice to recite a chant non-stop, making all the hairs on my body stand on end. Although it’s not possible, I still have the illusion of Günter’s hair twining around my arm.

“Waa--! It feels like something is going around my hand--!”

“That’s Günter’s soul.”

“Sole!? No, soul!?”

If that’s true, his soul is terrifying!

With as much energy as I’d have running out of a snakes’ nest, I pull my hand out of the amulet. But the after effect causes my back to knock against the table with a ‘thunk!’, and I’m panting as if I’d just run 400 meters. Once I’ve caught my breath a bit, my brain calms down too.

“It makes me so impatient.”

Hearing my sudden words, he asks, surprised,

“What?”

“Waiting for a result like this.”

“True, you’re usually personally on the frontlines. This should be your first time ordering your men, and waiting obediently at HQ for the good news, right? But that’s what monarchs are supposed to be like, get it memorized.”

“I’ve long since memorized it, but...”

I can’t move on my own, neither can I witness the happenings firsthand, what’s more these hands can’t touch anything at all, there’s nothing more

frustrating than this current situation.

And I'm only helping to solve a case in a town I happened to pass, in a land that has nothing at all to do with Shin Makoku. If I get so restless from something of this level, then those past kings who couldn't handle things themselves must have been even more anxious.

"What song is that?"

"Eh?"

It seems I had started singing a familiar tune without realizing it. Only I can't really remember the lyrics, so it's no different from humming it. That was the song I heard on the first day I stepped onto Seisakoku, the song sung by the people who supported Hazel, Venera.

Back then I thought it sounded familiar, but I didn't think it's a hymn from Earth. Hazel who came to this land on her own so long ago, treated it as a connection between herself and her hometown, singing and humming it constantly. She edited the lyrics, changed the religious target, and slowly spread it in this world.

"This is the song Hazel... Venera sings, I guess she's praising the god in her heart."

Right now the one they praise isn't God, but bravery. The one that even I'm praying to, isn't the repenting slave traders, but every citizen of Seisakoku.

"This is an Earth song."

"So you're saying, that old lady grew up in the same place as you!?"

"Different countries, though."

"You never met her while on Earth?"

"Of course not! You should know how many people there are on Earth."

I raise my chin to look out of the window, the world outside is so bright. Although it's long since afternoon, the color of the blue sky and white clouds is different, so the sky is still bright enough for me to differentiate it.

"Venera sure is impressive."

“Although she’s not young anymore, she is indeed very sharp.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I didn’t think Wolfram would respond to my mumbling, maybe it’s because we’re both casualties, so we sort of pity each other.

“She came to Seisakoku alone, and survived until now even though she doesn’t know the language or the environment. Not only did she survive, she even worries about the situation in this country, and tries to release those slaves who are unfairly treated, leading everyone to resist. And they’re not doing it violently, either, but peacefully. Eh, is this what they mean by a policy of non-resistance? Anyway she’s really impressive, you know, I can’t match up to her at all.”

“Aren’t you trying to solve everything peacefully, too?”

“But I always get help from everyone around me, and the strategies I come up with never go smoothly, most of the time I rely on coincidence and luck. All I can say is that I’m lucky, that’s how I made it safely until now.”

“Don’t say something so unlucky, what do you mean, never go smoothly...”

He’s right, no one would think such unlucky thoughts in the middle of an operation.

There’s the sound of running footsteps from the corridor, Wolfram holds his sword in his hand, and makes the sound of pushing the blade out of its sheath.

“Wolf.”

“Stay here, don’t move.”

He kicks the floorboard once and goes around behind the table, causing a breeze behind him—he should have run to the door.

Just as the wooden door is kicked open, the sound and movements of the enemy rushes in, together with male voices cursing, and the metallic clang of clashing weapons. Crap, there’s quite a few of them.

“Wolf! Don’t force yourself...”

“Stay there, don’t move!”

The sound of clashing blades which I can’t get used to no matter how many

times I hear it, vibrates the air and the room, making me so scared I want to cover up my ears. Although I'm really worried about Wolfram, fighting against multiple opponents, but right now I can't do a thing to help. Forget helping, it's all I can do protect myself.

"Wolf...? Wolfram!?"

It feels as though time is crawling past, but in reality it's probably only been two minutes. I sense the sound of clashing swords and the impacts coming through the floorboards slowly fading, so I called Wolfram's name.

"Wolf, are you alright!? Talk to me!"

"As if that needs saying."

His steps are nimble as he walks back to my side, and his voice sounds energetic too. But there's the smell of blood emanating throughout the room, and from his body as well. He probably notices my uneasiness, saying before I ask,

"I'm not hurt, this is all their blood, but they're not dead. Because you would probably say 'tie them into their horses and send them back' right?"

"Are you really okay?"

"Of course I am. What happened to Yuuri? After your vision got worse, you start worrying about nothing too?"

"No, of course not!"

"How could lackeys like that hurt me? The wound on my stomach is almost healed now, too, not a problem at all. Why don't you touch it and see—But first you must promise me you won't use maryoku—"

Before we can discuss that, there are already new footsteps infiltrating the room, and slowly approaching us.

"Looks like this isn't the time to chat."

The people this time are warier than before, they don't plan on barging in like that.

Wolfram swings his sword, hard, throwing off the blood and fats that reduce

its efficiency.

“What on earth is this? Damn, what’s happening?”

“I don’t know, either.”

If everything goes according to plan, there shouldn’t be enemies barging in. Don’t tell me something happened to Conrad or Hazel?

I have an urge to run out and yell, “What happened!?” Although I know that will only cause a bother for everyone, but I really can’t stop my legs dashing forward.

Right then my sensitive ears hear a light tapping on the glass, and someone calling me in a low voice.

“Your Majesty.”

“Hazel?”

Hazel Graves is outside the window, bending her body and calling me. Perhaps because she swam to avoid enemy detection, her hair is wet.

“What happened?”

“All I can say is we were unlucky, and came across the other equestrian tribe.”

“What did you say!?”

“They’re warring over the water rights, as long as one side makes a move, the other naturally cannot fall behind. Although there aren’t a lot of them, but they’re already leading their troops and rushing over here.”

“Even those who stay in the north-east?”

I sense that Hazel is nodding, and she says in Venera’s tone,

“It seems so.”

“When you say there aren’t a lot of them, around how many do you mean?”

“Over fifty. But it’s strange, the fake intel we released got into their ears within a night. Although it’s upsetting, from the way things are looking, even the north-north-west equestrian tribe has spies here.”

“Now isn’t the time to worry about others!”

“That’s exactly right.”

I keep getting the feeling she sounds very happy, she really is a brave person.

“The problem is they’re very cunning. They have quite a few shinzoku who can use offensive houjutsu, I’m afraid those were brought out from the facility in the north.”

“How are our losses? Did anyone get hurt?”

She chuckles once, but her voice doesn’t sound like she’s looking down on me,

“Your Majesty, you really are gentle. We’re fine, the soldiers and Captain-san protected us with their lives, only Ajira and his cousin were slightly grazed. Lord Weller is stopping the equestrian people from entering through the west side of the civilian houses, although I don’t know if the water purifiers are okay, but he will be fine.”

“Thank goodness.”

“Wait a sec, it’s still too early to relax. The enemies PRINCE put down are a new force that just entered, I’m here to help Your Majesty and the others escape. Two equestrian tribes attacking at once, at the way this is going the chances of a battle breaking out on the streets is very high, so the houses nearby are dangerous too, we have to leave here as soon as possible.”

“Coming!”

Before I can yell a warning, Wolfram has already engaged the enemy. The sound of metal and clashes once again rings out in the dining room.

“Wolf, get ready to leave!”

“Are we running away!?”

“Of course we’re escaping! But the townspeople here need to get away too, right? Aren’t those guys trying to break into civilian houses?”

“That’s right, they plan on destroying the water purifiers too, as a warning to the others. But as long as we lead the townspeople away, there won’t be any more serious casualties.”

“Anyway we have to try and see. Wolfram! Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.”

I was just thinking that the room has gotten quiet again, it turns out the soldiers that barged in afterwards were dealt with as well. Last time I have heard that his swordsmanship is strong, but I never thought he would be this strong, completely different from the Lord von Bielefeld I know, could it be that he’s been possessed by the sword god?

Could it be...

“I don’t know why, but the sword feels lighter than usual, and the enemy attacks look really slow too. It’s as though they’re being held back by some invisible tentacles, so they move clumsily.”

“Maybe it’s not tentacles, but hair...”

What a scary ‘Günter’s Protection’, new victims of the curse keep showing up.

“Alright, Your Majesty, there’s no time to take it slow anymore.”

“Okay, my foot is on the windowsill, right? It’s too dark, I can’t be sure.”

As I prepare to step across the window, Hazel tells me in a tone of sympathy,

“Your eyes still haven’t recovered? Ah~~ No problem, your footing is very stable, the ground underneath is sandy, so even if you jump down it’s okay, PRINCE, you come out too.”

If it was Wolfram’s usual attitude, he would definitely have a fit if a slave ordered him around like that, but today he’s different, and actually followed the old lady’s words obediently.

I’m guessing it’s because my praise for Hazel is having an effect, otherwise it must be because of ‘Günter’s Protection’. But no matter how others say it’s effective, I wouldn’t carry a pouch knitted from Günter’s hair with me even if you killed me. That’s no different from carrying a mini Günta^[2] around with me everywhere...

“Ah!”

“What is it?”

I remember that ‘there’s someone else we must take with us’. Since we’re

escaping, of course we would have to take Saralegui with us. Since he was locked in the single room, I nearly forgot.

When I pull open the door to the tool closet, Saralegui yawns wide, saying in a voice blurred with sleep,

“What is it~~ Is it morning now?”

“No, sheesh--! We’re escaping, Sara come with me!”



“Escape... Why... Could it be I made Mother angry again...?”

“Mother?”

I’ve never been called with such a fancy title^[3] before, so for a second I don’t understand what Saralegui is saying.

“Why does Mother only get angry at me? Yelshi, does Mother really hate me... Just because I’m not like you, who can use houryoku...”

“...Sara.”

Since he’s talking in such an upset tone, I can’t help but want to ask what he’s dreaming about. After asking, I also want to grip his hands tightly and say, “Your dreams aren’t the while reality.” But that’s impossible. The situation is desperate, and more importantly I don’t even know where Saralegui’s hands are.

“I said so before.”

I grab his clothes with my uninjured hand, pulling him up forcefully.

“I think your mom doesn’t hate you. Alright, stand up, ‘Your Majesty’ Saralegui. If you still don’t wake up, I’m tossing you down!”

References

1. [↑] The word for curious can also mean, having weird tastes. So this sentence can alternatively be translated as "You sure have weird tastes, huh, Yuuri?!".
2. [↑] Günter + Shota XD
3. [↑] I think it’s ‘Okaa-sama’, basically there’s a ‘-sama’ at the back.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

It's better to have more life experience.

But can you call being surrounded by fully-armed soldiers, and having guns pointed at you, a good experience? I can't help but wonder. After living twenty-odd years, from the perspective of a Japanese person's normal life, this is a very rare sight indeed.

"N-n-now what do we do, Bob!"

The only person who can be relied on now is Bob, a person from the normal society, no, putting aside the question of whether that man quietly doing radio aerobics in the diving suit he took off halfway is normal or not, at least he's a big name in the domestic world of finance, and he's an even bigger player who can affect the world's economy.

Completely lit up by the searchlights, Shibuya Shouri asks Bob with a face full of anticipation. There are already a few seaplanes gathering on the surface of Bodensee Lake inside Swiss borders, and even a few helicopters whirring overhead. And we're standing at gunpoint, even told to "Put your hands behind your head, keep your fingers crossed!" Wow! It feels just like those FBI shows on TV.

"You should have some connections with the military higher-ups, right?"

"Ha-ha-ha... To think I'll get a chance to let the young ones rely on me, it really makes me exceptionally happy."

"That's great! Hey, we're saved, Graves! Bob says he'll do something..."

"But unfortunately, I don't know a single person in the Swiss army."

"What--!?" Shouri yells strangely, pushing the glasses that almost slide off his nose back up,

“Then why are you still so carefree? ‘Ha-ha-ha’... What are you ‘ha-ha-ha’-ing about!? Ah! Hey, let go! No, sorry. Ah~~ Let go! Let go now! Don’t simply touch me like that!”

Shouri can’t help but make weird noises as his body is searched from top to bottom, and by a man, too. The other person just wants to check if he has any weapons on him, but the problem is he’s wearing a super tight diving suit, where could he hide a weapon? Without even his own handgun, Shouri is just a harmless goat.

He peeks at Abigail Graves beside him, only to see that although she’s being given the full body search just like Shouri, no matter how the soldiers search her she’s still unmoving as a rock, how manly.

Only the Frenchman who grew up in the Caribbean, Francois, for some reason requires three people to search him. At first he thought it was for safety purposes, who would have guessed those three people are caressing his pecs, their expressions reveling in it. It just proves that anyone would want to touch a beautiful body.

According to the personal info they heard along the journey, Francois’ birthday seems to be on the 29th of November. As expected, it’s a day of quality meat^[1], and very close to Shouri’s birthday as well.

Was this ... the lower part of Naniwa^[2]? Anyway, the self-proclaimed ‘TOP GUN’ brat DTJ is sulking in a corner of the little boat because everyone ignored him, looks like he’s completely disregarded as a threat.

Come to think of it, why do we have to suffer such treatment?

A gun against the back of his head, kneeling on the swaying deck, Shibuya Shouri can’t help but curse everything that happened today.

Why must an older brother who loves his little brother like me face such harsh treatment? It’s not like I’m here to uncover Switzerland’s national secrets, or to steal a super secret cheese recipe. I’m just here to find the ‘Box’ that has something to do with my beloved little brother’s whereabouts, that’s the only reason I’m here at this lake.

He doesn’t know who to take this anger out on, so he decides to curse his

brother's friend,

"Damn, that stupid Murata! Damned stupid Murata!"

Abigail brings her face closer to the muttering Shouri, and whispers in Japanese,

"We have no choice. Shouri, prepare to carry out Plan B."

"Plan B? What's that, is it Burappi's ^[3] manager company?"

"NONONO, it's the plan where Shouri grabbing the enemy's machine gun as I pretend to do my shoelaces, and shoots with everything you got. I call it... 'Yamato ^[4] Trickster Woman'."

"That's not called Yamato Trickster Woman, it's more like Yakushimaru Hiroko ^[5], right? And how could I possibly do something so dangerous!

"Anyway, something as scary as sweeping with a machine gun, I can't possibly do it. Don't be fooled by how I look, I'm a born and bred Japanese, don't you look down on the world-famous peace idiots."

"True—When you mention Japanese people, you think of Smith & Wesson ^[6] and Japanese swords—"

Abigail's intel seems to be slightly outdated.

Suddenly they realize DTJ, who was sulking in the corner, is now staring into the sky. His gaze looks just behind the helicopter hovering in mid-air. And then he suddenly starts waving his right hand non-stop, telling Bob, Abigail and Francois in English,

"Get down!"

The moment she heard the warning, Abigail grabs Shouri's neck, and presses him down onto the deck in one smooth movement.

"That hurts—What are you doing, Graves!"

"NO—Call me Abby~~"

"You're a real pain, Gai..."

Just as he's about to say '-I', the threat the TOP GUN predicted came true. A

small jet approaches with a roar at extremely low altitude, flying so low it just about touches their heads. Although it can't actually fly that low, to a layman like Shouri, it's enough for him to feel as though the hair on top of his head is almost being shaved off.

The jet may be small, but the air pressure still throws up huge waves on the water surface, the military seaplane swaying violently as well. Faced with the engine of a jet, the little boat Shouri's on is no match at all.

The Swiss soldiers standing on the boat fall down one by one, all thrown into the water, caught in the waves and sinking to the bottom of the lake.

Shouri immediately grabs Abigail's hand. Because she's younger, a girl and a Bostonian, he can't let her drown in a lake so far away from her homeland.

But he instantly remembers that Abigail has scuba training, and the one really in danger is him. Although he's wearing a diving suit, he has no oxygen tank on his back, and the most important thing now is breathing, if they don't float to the surface immediately they won't be able to breathe.

Although it's a moonless night, the searchlights still brighten up the water. The clear lakewater is dotted with white and blue, until even the faces underwater are all sparkling, the little bubbles from their mouth floating upwards slowly.

Someone pulls his hand, and Shouri looks behind him, only to see Abigail hand him an oxygen tank the size of a hair gel bottle. The expression on her face is less of a gentle smile, and more of a creepy grin. Accepting the oxygen tank, Shouri takes a deep breath and returns it to her.

She points at the bottom of the lake where the color is darker, and keeps swimming downwards while pulling Shouri's hand. Her brown hair floats without gravity, all her movements becoming slow.

She keeps gesturing 'over here over here'—Is that depth somewhere you can dive to without any equipment?

He closes the mouth that nearly opens, because it's no use talking in the water. With Abigail pulling his hand, Shouri looks in the direction of the darkness, even if she's a brave cheerleader cum rash treasure hunter, it's still impossible for her to simply dive to the bottom of the lake with such a small

oxygen tank, right?

The change occurs at a not-so-deep depth.

A violent current suddenly appears beside them, light and bubbles both disappearing from the surface of the water. Shouri's so panicked he wants to yell, but regains his senses after drinking a lot of water, realizing that his limbs can't move normally, and his body is ten times heavier than usual too.

The reason he can't move his heavy limbs freely, is because Abigail is hugging him tightly. She's not scared or panicked, but trying to push the oxygen into Shouri's mouth, only they keep swinging about in the water, so she can't manage it.

What's happening here!?

The same words repeat in his head three times, and there's still not a hint of an answer.

Shouri starts moaning in pain—the pain of his limbs being grabbed, pulled, and his body twisted around. Abigail's in the same boat, but she's a lot calmer than Shouri, even trying desperately to move her neck, contemplating the surface and the bottom of the lake alternatively.

Cursing “Damn!” and releasing a ton of bubbles, Shouri pushes the oxygen in his mouth to Abigail. That feeling is a lot like getting tossed into the center of a tornado.

Must get to the surface. Swim upwards, must figure out a way to swim upwards. But first we must change direction, because we're sinking to the bottom of the lake head-first. His neck being grabbed, Shouri slowly sinks downwards.

Before he can find it hard to breathe, Shouri's throat, having swallowed quite a lot of water, and his temple are already starting to throb. His skin sinks into his ribs under the pressure, his lungs with just remnants of air left bordering on exploding, Shouri clenches hard on his teeth and can't help but close his eyes. The strangeness his body feels from the water pressure, must mean he's already in the depths of the lake.

“What...”

Just as he's about to open his mouth and say "What is this", his surroundings become bright.

Water flows out of his nose and mouth, the brightness and temperature of his surroundings obviously different from before.

He's no longer looking at the lake in the middle of the night.

References

1. [↑](#) "One one two nine" is read as "ii ni ku" = Good Meat (ii niku) Day, and it's a recognized day in Japan!
(<http://d.hatena.ne.jp/keyword/%A4%A4%A4%A4%C6%F9%A4%CE%C6%FC>)
By the way, Shouri was born on 11.22, Good Couple Day (ii fufu2). Good Couple Day is also on 11.23 (ii fusai no hi, because numbers can be read in different ways. Shouri's birthday was originally on November 23, but Takabayashi-sensei later changed it to 22.
2. [↑](#) There are two possibilities here, either a Japanese cruiser (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_cruiser_Naniwa) which fits the metaphor of the boat, or the district in Osaka/old name for Osaka, which is the more literal translation since for some reason there's a line about 'downtown'...
3. [↑](#) Burappi = contraction for Brad Pitt, lol, which sounds like Plan B in Japanese-pronounced English?
4. [↑](#) Most likely the lead ship of the Yamato class of Imperial Japanese Navy World War II battleships.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_battleship_Yamato)
5. [↑](#) An actress (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiroko_Yakushimaru) who played the lead role in the movie Sailor Suit and Machine Gun.
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sailor_Suit_and_Machine_Gun_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sailor_Suit_and_Machine_Gun_(film)))
6. [↑](#) Apparently the revolver Japanese policemen use.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

After Wolfram, Saralegui and I escaped from the dining room, we follow Hazel to the lakeside. In order to hide from the equestrian tribes, we advance with our backs bent. As for places without buildings, we creep forward.

When we come across houses facing the lake, we knock on the windows and doors, if there are residents inside we advise them to leave, even helping children escape through the windows. But Wolfram and I can't speak the Seisakoku language, and we don't think Saralegui will help, so the only one in charge of talking is Hazel.

There are also families who refuse to escape, that's when she gets to flaunt her speaking skills.

After all she has plenty of life experience, so naturally her powers of persuasion are exceptional. As a veteran adventurer cum treasure hunter, Hazel Graves was once trapped in the royal tombs, and attacked by crocodiles and tigers in the forest, and surrounded by armed forces, and even had a gun pointed at her head.

She just has to tell those townspeople how dangerous and scary it is to be surrounded by soldiers, and most of them would immediately run out.

But thankfully the north-north-west equestrian tribe and the north-east equestrian tribe (what a mess) don't start fighting on the bank of the lake, the main warzone is in the large streets and small alleys. Mostly they'll fight one round with their archenemies first, then only break open the doors and threaten the residents.

In other words, "we can do whatever we want to the defenseless townspeople later, the important thing now is beating the enemy".

We tell the townspeople not to exit through the door, and escape from the windows facing the lake instead, and then skirt around the lakeside to leave town from the south. That route has a lower chance of bumping into the equestrian tribes.

There isn't a moon or stars tonight, so although they won't be noticed by the enemy, it's also very hard to advance without a light. Especially since my eyes are completely useless, it's no different from being in the darkness, but at this moment 'Eyes Wide Open-kun' surprisingly comes in handy.

Saralegui has night vision several times better than most people.

"Oh, yeah, come to think of it Yuuri can't see."

"That's right, come to think of it you can see, huh—"

"There's no need to be that jealous, sheesh."

He laughs like a bird from deep within his throat,

"In that case, I'll always hold your hand."

"No need, I mean I politely refuse!"

"Otoko wari^[1]? Are you talking about the days where only men have a privilege when watching the performances? But compared to having a special price, I'd rather have softer and more comfortable seats. But now isn't time to watch the show... Alright, don't be shy with me."

Before he finishes his words, Saralegui is already grabbing my right hand forcefully, and I instantly feel a cutting pain.

"...Ow!"

The wound under the cloth in place of a bandage hasn't healed and starts hurting now, I can only clench my teeth and bear with it. Because my pride doesn't allow me to cry out in any way in front of Saralegui.

Instead it's Wolfram behind me that growls. If it were the normal him, he'd have let his fists do the talking ages ago. Although he really wants to, right now all he can do is bear with it.

When it comes to Saralegui, as well as the temporary truce with Conrad—

which means with the Dai Shimaron ambassador, I've told Wolf everything without hiding a thing, and he knows what kind of a person the Shou Shimaron king is too. But since it's safer to let Saralegui hold my hand, he can only open one eye and close the other now.

Although his personality is very emotional, recently when it comes to any critical moments, he will show the bravery to resist his impulses. After all, he's a man more suited than me to be the Maou.

"Yuuri, stop."

"Wait a sec."

At the same time Sara stops me, Hazel, who is walking in front, gets us to stop too, tsking bitterly,

"Those fellas are fighting not far away, there's about seven or eight of them. There aren't any more buildings to hide behind up ahead, we'll definitely get discovered."

"What do we do now?"

"Be more careful, let's take a short detour. After a while we can meet up with Lord Weller and the rest."

Hazel asks everyone to purposely choose an area with many buildings and that's hard to notice from the streets, and advance through there. Because the space between houses is narrow, they can't rush immediately at us even if they notice us.

"You said there are at least fifty riders?"

"That's right."

"That's at least a hundred people trying to kill each other... How did it get to this?"

"Because the north-east equestrian people couldn't resist anymore and went for the first strike. They probably want to monopolize the water source, that's why they sent people over so hurriedly, right? Thank goodness it's only the scouting group, if it were their main forces, it wouldn't be this sort of little scuffle here."

“Something of this degree is still called a little scuffle, huh.”

Although right now I can only rely on my hearing, I can still hear the cries, curses, and clashes of weapons from our surroundings. Since the fighting and killing is happening on the other end of the civilian residences, they can't hear the sounds from nearby, and instead we hear most of the noises. This is the same principle as how it's easier to see the whole picture if you take one step back.

When I'm listening to all the voices, I suddenly have the sensation of turning around in circles on the spot. But the one turning isn't my body, but the air around me, spinning 360 degrees like a donut, when in fact I haven't moved at all.

Tragic cries pierce my ears through the spinning. That's not weak weeping, but desperate shouts for help, probably from the houses nearby.

“Someone's crying... It's a child, a child is crying.”

“Because crying is what they do.”

“Not like that!”

I feel impatient towards the calm demeanor of someone used to this, so I touch Hazel's back, even grabbing her shoulder to make her stop walking.

“That's not crying out of fear, it should be more dangerous... Ah~~ How should I describe this? They need help, someone is crying and shouting, they need the help of an adult.”

“Your Majesty, this isn't an orphanage, there won't be just kids, they should have their parents by their side.”

“Could it be their mother died?”

I tell Wolfram the same thing, that there's a child crying, and we need to save them.

Hazel says, “What is it?” As though comforting me, Wolfram pats my neck gently, completely indulging my rash behavior.

“I'll go look.”

“I’m coming too.”

“No, you stay here! If anything happens to you, I won’t be able to face His Majesty Shinou.”

After he breaks the window and charges in, there’s no reaction for a long time, while instead my heart beats so loudly even I can hear it. Suddenly there’s a loud explosion, numbing both my sense of sight and sound.

My previously dark vision instantly brightens, and it’s all orange. Not only can’t I feel the cold from before, my face and arms are enveloped by the approaching heat.

What on earth happened?

“Wolf! Wolfram!”

“I’m here!”

A body heavier than usual jumps out of the window, he’s probably carrying a child, followed tightly by a weeping woman.

“Is there no one else, Wolfram? It couldn’t be twins, could it!?”

“I want to save...”

After that there are two more explosions. This time it’s not just the heat, there are also small bits of sand flying everywhere.

“Flames...”

“As I was saying! It’s those guys setting things on fire, and the fire’s spreading very quickly. The houses nearby are all burning, I’m afraid we will be surrounded by the fire in no time.”

“But aren’t those brick houses? Technically they shouldn’t burn so quickly...”

“That’s right, your eyes can’t see...”

His voice suddenly lowers.

“Maybe that’s better for you.”

“What? What happened?”

I grab Wolfram’s hand, hoping to get an answer out of him. But there’s a warm

body between us, and I know he's carrying a quietly shaking child.

"What on earth happened? Don't tell me it's not a normal fire?"

"A fire is a fire, it's not normal or abnormal. Anyway we have to leave here immediately, or it's a matter of time before we're forced into the boiling lake."

Although Wolfram doesn't elaborate, but using my ears and skin, I can also feel that this fire is different from normal. Not only do the piercing screams increase, the hot air in contact with my face and neck is rather intense as well, as though I'm standing under the high summer sun. The sounds of explosions in all directions tell me the fire is spreading everywhere.

"The streets are burning."

Saralegui says happily,

"Since Yuuri can't see, let me describe it to you. The streets are burning, and the fire is spreading at a very high speed. The flames are just like a snake of fire, continuously extending and moving. How wonderful~~ It's my first time seeing this kind of fire, too, it's very abnormal indeed."

"When you say abnormal..."

Saralegui's voice becomes two, crashing down on my eardrums.

"I mean this shouldn't be a normal fire. Yuuri, you should know that a fire started by majutsu and houjutsu, is different from an average fire. Be it the strength, the spreading, or the method of putting out the fire, they'll all be different. Did you know? Just a bit of water won't be enough to stop this fire."

I remember when there was a huge forest fire near the country borders, I heard something like this before. Gwendal and Wolfram even said, no matter how much water you use, you can't put out a fire started by houjutsu.

"One of the equestrian tribes has quite a few shinzokus who can use offensive houjutsu, it must be they forced the shinzoku to do something so filthy."

Hazel grits her teeth bitterly, but her words are eventually drowned out by a woman's screams. But Saralegui is still clapping his hands, saying in a tone as though he discovered some rare flower,

"Goodness, even people are burning."

“What did you say?”

“I said even people are burning.”

“People...”

Wolfram wants to grab me, now unresponsive, but maybe he misjudged the distance, because only his fingers brush past me, he couldn't pull my body.

A wailing woman runs past me at a very close distance, quickly followed by a loud splash. After she passes, the screams and odor of burning hair still linger—that's the odor of protein charred to a crisp.

My legs move faster than my brain, and I give chase. The woman runs into the lake and soaks her body in the water, trying to put out the fire in her hair, but even though the water is waist-deep, I can still hear her screams, I know the fire hasn't been extinguished.

The fire hasn't been extinguished.

My orange vision turn bright red, the depths of my nose hurts as though I breathed in seawater.

I feel dizzy.

It feels as though someone's yelling my name, but the distance is too far for me to tell whose voice it is, and so I can't answer.

At the same time I hear another murmuring voice. The bright red vision slowly fades, finally turning colorless, it's practically like I'm surrounded by white, a world without darkness.

The murmurs slowly become words, the white space slowly become a figure.

That person is definitely angry, and for all I know, extremely upset.

What should I do? Should I stop here?

No, I won't stop. I want to do what I should do, at the time I need to do it.

No matter the consequences.

My will... I hope you understand.

Because this is my life, I decide how to use it.

That’s right, this is my life.

I decide how to use it.

References

1. [↑](#) The Japanese for ‘I politely refuse’ or ‘No thank you’ (okotowari) sounds similar to 'male discount' (otoko wari).

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

How could there be something like this?

Seeing the unimaginable scene, Hazel Graves raises her head, so surprised she forgets to blink.

The lake that was silent and still just a moment again, suddenly changes drastically.

The overflowing lakewater rises like an inverted waterfall, forming a transparent whirlpool over everyone's heads. Soon the whirlpool expands until it's large enough to cover the entire town, and slowly changes in shape.

This is really unbelievable, water can actually stay in mid-air without any support, keeping its shape without freezing, even become the shape of an animal.

Even Hazel, who has lived on shinzoku land for so long, and seen many houjutsu unseen on Earth, is wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

The young man stands waist-deep in the water, glancing over in their direction with a haughty attitude and a sharp gaze.

Originally he was a gentle and kind child.

But a long and elegant water creature seems to grow out of that raised arm. At first she thought it was a snake, but according to what Hazel knows, that thing is closer to an Eastern dragon, even the scales appear on its body one by one.

"Your Majesty... Yuuri!"

Hearing the familiar voice, Hazel looks to the lakeside, and finally notices Lord Weller, running over and yelling at the young man. Maybe it's because he notices who else is there, Lord Weller points at Wolfram at one side, signaling for him to go to Yuuri immediately.

“Stop him, Wolf! Stop him now!”

Conrad wants to run here, but he’s knocked over by an escaping woman. Once he steadies his footing he readies himself to keep running , but this time he’s stopped by an incoming crowd.

Wolfram wants to put the child in his arms down onto the ground, but the frightened little girl grabs him and won’t let go, that little hand buried in his clothes unwilling to relax no matter what.

“Yuuri! Stop, don’t use maryoku!”

His voice can’t reach the young man’s ears.

Hazel goes “tsk!” and grips her fist tightly again. She runs full-tilt towards Yuuri, who’s standing in the water, trying to shorten the distance between them, but the roiling lakewater is a huge obstruction in her path.

The water dragon locks on to its prey, attacking the flames in a certain place. The roaring flames go out in the blink of an eye.

The lakewater rears its head again, rising like a wall of water into the sky, and forming a powerful whirlpool over Yuuri’s head.

Hazel clenches her teeth, and says this to herself,

I am an adventurer.

Quietly she calms herself down.

As an adventurer, I’ve seen countless scenes. Sometimes when I get into huge problems, I even prepare myself to die. In the ancient tombs and jungle caves I found things that shouldn’t exist in the world, and materials that surpass human understanding, even coming into contact with those powers that pose terrifying threats.

The scariest is that Box, the Box that blew me up and into this world.

When coming into contact with that evil power, Hazel thought her skin was burning, her bones turning to powder, her limbs cut and sliced open, her neck twisted and snapped, she felt as though she was literally flying towards the sun—the power of that Box is exactly that shocking. Afterwards she heaved a sigh of relief too, glad that she never met such terrifying power again.

And now, that enormous power once again appears before her eyes—the huge Eastern dragon raising its neck and waiting for its master’s orders. That beautiful and terrifying dragon, incites fear and respect even in a nonbeliever like her.

But what is this? The ones who were always by his side protecting him yell his name in panic, and are even trying desperately to stop him. But they can’t stop him in time, they can’t even reach him with their outstretched hands.

The lakewater that rises from the center falls apart at a height about three people tall, it looks like Yuuri is about to be drowned by the rapid currents and beating waves. Before Yuuri is swept into the waterfall, Hazel Graves is one step faster, grabbing his body.

In the second she runs into the lakewater, she does her best to take a deep breath. When she was younger she could still hold for a few minutes, but by this age, there’s no guarantee. For all she knows she’ll use up her oxygen in an instant, and can’t stand too long in the water at all.

Scared? No, how could she be scared.

Her heart is very calm.

The lake is like the sea in a storm, unbelievable waves binding around their bodies. Their feet can’t touch the ground, pulled into the dark and blue water, and sinking at a scary rate. She tries to estimate how deep the water is, but all she sees is a deep blue circle, it’s impossible to gauge the bottom of the lake with her naked eye.

Her right arm is hugging Yuuri’s body, using her remaining left arm to row with all her strength towards the surface, but their bodies aren’t moving upwards at all. It’s as though he’s being tied down by transparent seaweed, pulling him towards the darkness. To find the reason behind it, she looks towards the bottom of the lake again, and realizes that the dark circle is slowly moving, the water around them starting to spin as well.

Are you kidding me, if a whirlpool appears now, forget swimming to the surface, it’ll be really hard just swimming. Hazel spits out the carbon dioxide in her mouth, smiling bitterly at the direction of the bubbles as they float away—how she envies the bubbles, able to float straight up without any effort at all.

She notices that Yuuri isn't moving at all, and looks at the young man in her arms disbelievingly.

The young man who was just controlling the water dragon with tremendous power, is now staring at the bottom of the lake without moving an inch, just staring at the deep blue whirlpool.

The creases on his brow and that sharp gaze that appeared just now, are all but gone. He's back to being that polite and kind young man during the travels.

Since her strokes are getting weaker and weaker, she decides to relax her whole body and just sink. Hazel can't help but call God's name, and the lakewater takes that opportunity to flow into her mouth.

Lord, if Your holy powers can also reach this country, please lend me a hand as You did when I was young, and save this child.

Even before her prayer ends, Yuuri raises his previously slumped hand, pointing at the bottom of the lake where the whirlpool began, as though searching for someone's shadow.

A small dot appears in front of his finger, and that dot gets larger and larger, even becoming a pale blue hole.

Hazel can't help but disbelieve her eyes.

How can this be? This is the only large oasis in the Seisakoku desert, they're only sinking to the bottom of this turbulent lake because she tried to stop Yuuri who was using maryoku. What's happening here, what strange power is opening up a hole at the bottom of the lake?

But when a human head pokes through vaguely from that spot, she finally accepts the fact.

But this child, is probably coming through the gap this little buddy opened. He's pulling someone from over there, someone from another world, and bringing them here. It must be some dimensional wall or some other method to cross dimensions, just like how she was blasted into this world.

Yuuri suddenly twists his body, breaking free from Hazel's hands. He slowly sinks to somewhere near the bottom of the lake, desperately reaching his hand

out to the thing that look like a human silhouette, and then disregards the fact that he's in the water, yelling,

“Aniki!”

Hazel forgets her own pain as well, her eyes staring directly at Yuuri and the figure. Actually she just has to reach out her hand, and she'll be able to hook the young man's leg. Right now she shouldn't let him keep sinking, and should instead pull him out of the water. But she doesn't do that, because she can't.

The figures in front of them become clearer and clearer.

It's a man and a woman.

The man is blocked by Yuuri so she can't see him, but she can see the woman clearly. Her long hair is swaying in the water, a young woman in her teens. She seems to see Hazel's figure too, her movements stopping in her surprise.

She grabs the man's hand with one hand, holding a thin and long cylinder in the other—could that be an oxygen tank? How could there be such a silly girl, carrying such simple diving equipment?

But no matter how silly the girl is, Hazel doesn't plan on scolding her.

After all, the girl staring at her... Her face...

“Yuuri!?”

Beside the hesitating Hazel, Yuuri yells at that man,

“I will go back!”

Although they're underwater, he still does his best to open his throat,

“Although there's no way now, but I will definitely go back!”

By the time he finishes his words, the whirlpool has gotten stronger and stronger too, and the two figures that were in the center are both sucked inside. Before they can determine where they are, the whirlpool is slowly getting closer, and is so strong it only pulls the two apart.

Ah~~ If only I could talk like him.

Hazel grabs Yuuri's leg, sighing in her heart.

They're underwater, technically they shouldn't be able to talk, and that fact is what tied Hazel down, so even though the name she wanted to yell is already at her lips, she still can't send her thoughts to the other party.

But no matter what, the name she's thinking isn't correct, because that girl isn't April Graves.

"...NIOR! JUNIOR! Hang in there! Your wounds aren't serious!"

His hearing is back. Shouri takes a while to recover from his daze and realize that something bouncy is pressed on his lips, and that's why he can't breathe smoothly. So he desperately waves his hands, to tell everyone he's still alive.

"Oh~~ Thank goodness, JUNIOR, you've come back to us."

When he raises his heavy eyelids, he finds that his whole body is dripping wet as he lies on the shore, a naked-from-waist-up Bob and pale Abigail staring at him. What's surprising is that annoying DJ is expressing his concern too from behind Bob's shoulder.

As for the Swiss soldiers standing opposite them, they all look awkward, they probably won't suspect us anymore, right?

The only thing bugging him now is the sea-type Frenchman Francois, with his arms crossed in front of his chest. His coffee-colored face and seductive lips, have a very satisfied smile on them.

Don't tell me I...

Forget it, it's better not to think about it.

"Thank goodness, you weren't breathing when we pulled you out, you nearly scared me to death. It's all thanks to Francois, who massaged your heart and performed C..."

"I don't want to hear it!"

Let's just pretend that never happened.

But he was drowning at the bottom of the lake, and the insides of his diving

suit are soaked too, while the back of his head is being pricked painfully by the sharp stones in the grass.

Although he knows it's irrational, he still can't help but make a short fuss.

"By the way, what's up with that plane? That extreme low-altitude flying style nearly caused an accident! Don't tell me... Hey, don't tell me something actually happened?"

"How is that possible, not only is that pilot from the German air forces, their technique is also really impressive, there's no way they'd crash from this level of aerial trick."

"Ah? You know that pilot?"

Bob smiles behind his sunglasses.

"Although I don't know a single person from the Swiss army, but I have friends in Swiss banks. To spice things up here, I invited him to bring his private jet here."

Shouri sits on the ground and looks around —other than overturned oats, there are all sorts of other things floating on the surface of the lake. Not only are there bent branches and broken bridges, there's also something you can tell at once is military paint, and the soldiers are hastily cleaning up the mess.

They indeed spiced things up, but why didn't they take the opportunity to run while the Swiss army are disoriented...

Although the soldiers look embarrassed, they're still watching us. Even if they're not treated as criminals, but there's no avoiding a lecture and apology letter.

"Looks like we can't escape anymore."

"But his actions awakened the power of Lake Bodensee. The best proof is, didn't you and Abigail peek into the world on that side?"

The world on that side?

After Bob's reminder, Shouri finally remembers. That's right, I sank to the bottom of the lake, and experienced something unbelievable.

“I...”

“Went there!”

Abigail Graves replies in English, swinging her wet hair excitedly.

“Although it was just for a second, but we went there! We went there, how awesome--!”

“You say we went there, but where the heck is there?”

“Don’t you remember, Shouri? There is the other world, we went to the other world through the bottom of the lake!”

And she added, dissatisfied—“Though only our top halves.”

“Mn, meaning you experienced what happened to Murata at the spot-billed duck lake.”

“Goodness, is it a scene like in the movies when a body is chopped in half?”

In that case, it’s not a dream or an illusion. Shouri slowly straightens up his body and stands. That’s not a beautiful dream he had while unconscious, or a happy illusion drawn up by his oxygen-deprived brain.

I did indeed see Yuuri, and my hand did almost grab my little brother.

“But JUNIOR and Abigail didn’t touch the Box, right? Then why could you instantly open a door to the other world, and how much power was needed? I don’t believe only a small jet rustling up the water, would have this sort of effect.”

“Forget it, a trivial thing like that isn’t worth worrying about.”

Who cares if it’s something unexplainable by theories, or laws of physics, Shouri still reached his hand out for his little brother. In that short time he managed to connect to Yuuri, and even exchanged a conversation that couldn’t turn to sound. So it doesn’t matter what’s the reason, and whose power it is.

In any case Yuuri said it: “Although there’s no way now, but I will definitely go back!”

“Although there’s no way now, but I will definitely go back!”

Shouri keeps repeating that line, pressing his index and middle fingers on his

temple, hoping to lock his little brother's voice in there.

I will wait for you.

"...I will wait for you."

That little brother who is now far away needs a home to come back to.

Yuuri, your home is here, so you must come back.

Shouri holds his hands tightly and puts them on his knees, murmuring to himself: Come back quickly, Yuu-chan. We're a family, and Aniki will be waiting for you...

Aniki?

"Aaaaaah--!"

"What is it, JUNIOR? Your glasses disappeared?"

"Now that you mention it, my glasses really are gone, but this has nothing to do with that! Y-Yuu-chan called me Aniki, he called me Aniki..."

"Why are you sighing, don't you wish he would call you Aniki?"

"No! Not Aniki, I don't want him to call me Aniki!"

Hearing 'Aniki', Francois turns around suddenly, looks like people tend to call him 'Aniki' or 'Boss'[\[1\]](#).

"At a time like this, he still refuses to call me Onii-chan—"

The foreigner Abigail Graves shrugs exasperatedly, looking down on the man who's wailing over this meaningless reason. In the past she heard that the Japanese don't really show their familial affections, but it seems the Shibuya household is an exception.

Thinking "Is his little brother really that cute?", she tries to remember Shouri's brother that she saw that time. But the one who appears in her mind, is the old grandma beside Yuuri.

"I keep feeling as though I saw her somewhere, there's a really familiar feeling... I say, Shouri, is that old grandma your brother's friend?"

"What? Old grandma? Who are you talking about, how come I didn't see her?"

I'm a guy whose head is filled with only Yuu-chan, y'know!"

"Oh dear, but she was hugging your little brother tightly, eh?"

"What did you say--!? An old grandma hugging him--!?"

After being proud of something not worthy of being proud of, Shouri's expression changes drastically.

"W-w-w-why would Yuu-chan be together with an old grandma? N-no way, right? I always thought he's not dating girls of the same age as him because he has no luck with the ladies, and was even relieved from it, but to think he actually likes older ones... Blergh!"

"What's the matter, JUNIOR?"

"Because the image in my imagination is too extreme, so s-suddenly my stomach... my stomach really hurts..."

"W-when you say that I just realized me too!"

Abigail's stomach makes an un-cheerleader-like noise too, her guts roaring like a tiger.

"Mn—So you greedy things went to the other world to feast."

"No, we didn't!"

"Mn—Francois, could you ask the Swiss army if they'd be willing to lend us the washrooms?"

"YEAH—It's our first time borrowing a washroom!"

"YEAH, is it!? Is this the time to yell YEAH!?"

He really can't stand gangster high school girls.

But after that they personally experience, how hard it is to take off a diving suit at the critical moment.

References

1. [↑](#) Reference to the yakuzas, the japanese mafia.

Chapter 7

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After being pulled out of the water and finally regaining consciousness, I feel extremely upset with myself.

Not only has the town been razed to the ground, it's still soaked in the water even now.

I can't see this terrible sight, only the last remaining fires in the darkness show up in my vision.

Advancing along the torched remnants of walls, we meet casualties everywhere on the streets, but most of them are equestrian people. Although it might not be too nice to say this, but just thinking that they robbed these innocent townspeople of their homes and even set them on fire, makes me feel as though they deserve whatever they got.

But at the same time I still can't bear to ignore these people in pain.

I asked Dacascos and the Captain to heal them however they can, and only then do I return to the building acting as our base of operations, supported by Wolfram and Conrad.

In the end our side lost horribly. No, I can't say which side lost, if I had to say, it would be my own personal loss.

I just sit on the hard chair, not in the mood to face the results of the battle.

I'm waiting for Conrad, standing in front of me, to say something, but he seems to be angry too, and doesn't say anything to comfort me.

"I saw Aniki."

Even I feel it's really sudden. Just as I'm feeling surprised, the words leave my mouth. I couldn't stand the silence, but the contents of those words take me by surprise.

“Rather than say I saw him, I should say I met him.”

That person is indeed Shouri. Not only did I touch his hand, I even said some things to him. Since we were underwater, we didn’t talk the normal way.

“But what surprised me is that he brought a girl with him, and a foreigner at that... A foreigner! When did Shouri meet her?”

“When?”

“When I fell to the bottom of the lake.”

“Was it when you lost sense of yourself?”

“That way of putting it sounds really bad.”

Conrad immediately apologizes to me.

“But how did he do it... Without extremely powerful strength or maryoku, he shouldn’t have been able to come to the other world. Does your brother have maryoku?”

“I don’t know—But he’s really smart at learning new things.”

“Since your brother has no maryoku, it could be your power that summoned him.”

“I can do something like that?”

“As for that, I’m unable to conclude anything, we can only find out by enquiring at the Shinou Shrine. But you say he wasn’t alone, if the other party asks about it, how would he explain it?”

“I was with Hazel, too, Shouri may have seen her. For all you know that girl... Come to think of it, I feel as though that foreign girl looks a lot like someone, who could it be?”

Although no one’s going to answer even if I ask, but that girl beside Shouri, looks a lot like someone I’ve seen recently. I try to remember how they looked and acted back then.

They were both wearing skintight black clothes, and I think the girl was hugging Shouri tightly.

“What on earth was Shouri doing!? Wearing skintight clothes and hugging like

that!”

That’s not an image you can let your own brother witness. How embarrassing, I mean to say, how overboard of him. I suspected a long time ago that he has some special preferences, but that’s my first time seeing it with my own eyes. Damn that Shouri, so it turns out not only do you like playing eroge, you even secretly have a fetish for skintight clothes.

Finding out my older brother’s fetish makes me a little uncomfortable, until my butt even feels a little itchy. No, rather than itchy, it’s more prickly.

“Eh?”

I reach my hand into my pocket, and find the glasses I picked up in the lake inside. That pain was from the frames pressing into my flesh, huh? But I find these frames somewhat familiar, don’t tell me this is a souvenir from Shouri? To think he came all the way to this world, left his glasses, and went back just like that.

I really can't tell if this is supposed to be a big deal or not^[1].

“...dy?”

“Eh, what?”

“I was asking you, how’s your body.”

At first I still didn’t understand why he would be asking this sort of question—I can’t raise my right shoulder too high, the wound of my left hand still hasn’t closed, I can’t see—Conrad should know all this.

He knows my injuries even better than I do.

“Ugh—My stomach hurts.”

“Because you drank it.”

He says in a fed-up tone, “You drank the unfiltered water.”

I personally ‘tested’ the lakewater that was polluted by houjutsu, to find out what symptoms would show up after drinking it. As I expected, Conrad doesn’t think that’s a purifying houjutsu either, at the most it was just filtered.

“Anything else?”

“Nothing much.”

“Even though you used such an extravagant majutsu?”

“I see, so that’s it.”

In other words, he’s worried about me losing control.

Actually, there are still many things that make me uneasy. Other than my long-awaited Ue-sama mode, there’s also the fact that Seisakoku is the land of the shinzoku. Since I used maryoku in a place filled with houryoku, he’s worried that my body can’t take it and I’ll collapse.

“There’s nothing particularly different, and I think it’s different from the past. Last time, I would faint every time, but today I didn’t lose my consciousness from the exhaustion, I just feel a little tired, that’s all. Although, yesterday I nearly collapsed in the underground passage, and today I fought this battle too, so I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t tired... Even so, I’m just really sleepy and my whole body aches. That’s right, it should just be lack of sleep and muscle sores.”

That sort of answer seems to be unable to convince him. After asking questions like “Does your head hurt?” and “Is your vision back?”, he finally mutters,

“In that case, purposely keeping Wolfram away would be pointless as well. To think you used maryoku on something other than healing.”

“What, so that’s why!”

I can’t help but grin. Still, I can’t help but be very concerned about the strict attitude he had towards Wolfram during that reunion.

“I always found it strange, why were you so strict to him?”

Lord Weller clears his throat a little, saying in a solemn tone,

“Technically speaking, his actions were a serious offense. I didn’t think the only punishment was to keep him away from you, even I feel my brain is getting slower and slower these days. But more importantly, you really don’t feel uncomfortable in any way?”

“Spare me, I really don’t feel weird anywhere. Or would you rather I be unwell?”

“How could that be! I’m just worried about you, that’s all. Didn’t I say so before, worrying about you is my duty.”

“If you really want to worry for me so badly, I won’t stop you. In any case it’s no different from before, and my sight is still terrible too...”

Wait a sec.

I told Conrad my vision still isn’t back to normal, and I can’t even see his face clearly, neither can I completely understand what’s happening around us. Then how did I meet Shouri? Not only did I see my older brother, I even remember the appearance of the girl with him clearly, so clearly I can say she looks a lot like someone.

Why on earth is that?

“...I could see.”

“Eh?”

I don’t know to ask what kind of expression Conrad has on now. Even if I raise my head to look, all I see is the silhouette of the left half of his body, illuminated by the candlelight. But back then I could indeed see—Be it that girl’s hair, swaying in the water, or the white bubbles floating to the surface of the lake, I could see all of it clearly.

“I could indeed see, back then I really could see. Though now it’s back to the start.”

“Only while you were in the water?”

“That’s right... No, not that...”

I start thinking back, arranging the scenes from back then in a row, like photographs in my mind.

Shouri, the foreign girl, the sky as seen from underwater, the pillar of water with orange light, the water pillar darting about everywhere in the shape of a dragon... Flames, flames, and the townspeople running everywhere.

And then there were the few equestrian people standing in the fire. Wait a sec, in that case I should have seen that more clearly—That’s right, there were three equestrian people, the one in the middle had a slender body. Underneath the

hat flapping loudly in the hot air, there was a face with bright golden eyes.

“No way...”

“What is it? What did you see? Did you remember something?”

I press the corners of my eyes with my index and middle fingers. How can that be, he couldn't have been here. It must be because I haven't used my eyes for too long, that's why I was mistaken.

“I'm fine, and I didn't remember anything either, all I could remember is flames, water, and Shouri. Anyway, I could only see while I was in Ue-sama mode, and for a short while after that. What is this, even I can't figure out the reason—The me right now shouldn't be able to figure it out. I just can't”

“Is that so... But it's a good sign that you recovered temporarily, maybe the period in which you can see will gradually increase.”

Maybe it's because I look dejected, Conrad hurriedly adds,

“But on the other hand, your other senses will become sharper, maybe that'll come in use when it comes to sports. After all, what your eyes see isn't everything.”

“That's the complete opposite of what Hazel said. I remember her saying everything you see will happen^[2].”

“I heard her say so too.”

Hazel, the only one who crossed that underground passage before us, once said, “Everything you see will happen.” Even if it's something that makes no sense. But maybe what Conrad says is true, too, and what you see isn't everything.

I cover my useless eyes with my wounded palm, slowly thinking back on everything that happened to us.

I saw mice, they ran past my feet like a grey carpet. But I didn't see birds and bats, and neither did they attack me.

What if only the things I saw with my eyes happened? What if it was all an illusion, but I believed I saw it?

“In that case... In that case, there’s a high chance Josak might not be dead. Don’t you agree, Conrad?”

“Right now you don’t need to think about all that.”

“How can I not think about it!”

Lord Weller sighs softly, and when he speaks again, his tone is as hateful as a stranger’s.

“What did he say?”

“Huh?”

“I’m asking you, what’s the last thing he said.”

The image from that time awakens in my mind. I bite my lip tightly, closing my eyes so tightly my eyelids cramp for the exertion.

“He told me... to keep running.”

“If so, then please follow his instructions, you shouldn’t be thinking back.”

“But he might still be alive!?”

“If he’s still alive, he’ll probably find a way on his own.”

To this day I still remember the stone slab that came down with an enormous noise, the boulder that crashed into the slab, the impact that sent me flying, and the shudder I felt underneath my palm. Until now, whenever I think about that time, my palm still feels numb, I couldn’t forget about it even if I tried.

“If he couldn’t escape, he would think of something else. Gurrier is a soldier, he made the mental preparations a long time ago.”

“Mental preparations...”

“Anyway, he wouldn’t want Your Majesty to be bothered over his sacrifice.”

“If he really died, I would give up^[3]!”

Because he smiled like in a Christmas drawing, a smile like a saint from different religions. If that was his final smile, and he would never come back, then I would give up. But if he’s still breathing, if he can still talk, laugh, if I can even touch him again...

“If I’m certain he’s really dead, then I will accept this reality and give up. But if what Hazel said is true, then there’s a high chance Josak is still alive. The things that happened there may all be illusions, and there might not be a boulder rolling down at all. But we saw that boulder, and believed it was rolling down at us, and put down that stone slab while under the illusion, and just like that, left Josak there... That’s right, that must be it!”

I raise my head and grab Conrad’s hands, feeling as though I can see his brown eyes, glowing with silver light.

“After I lost my sight underground, nothing happened, nothing at all before you came. The reason I mistook Wolf for an enemy, is also because the light was reflected off his sword—I assumed anyone with a sword was an enemy. Before that Sara once said there was something coming, but I already couldn’t see, and in the end nothing happened. There was just a creature brushing past in the beginning...”

“Then what about the fact that the wound from back then is still on your face?”

“Ah...”

I touch my face with my hand, and find a long scab. Although it’s a small scratch of barely two centimeters, it’s still the proof of a wound.

“It’s because at that moment you thought something was coming. Back then you thought it was an unknown creature, like birds or bats flying at you in a swarm, right? In other words, even if it’s just a split-second thought, it would have an effect on your body. Even if afterwards you want to deny it, the terror of that moment will not disappear. Then what about Josak? He saw the boulder rolling down at him, and had no time to suspect it at all.”

“Don’t say anymore!”

My fingers can’t leave the wound. How I wish it could disappear.



“That’s why he brought down the stone slab to stop the boulder. To him, the boulder wasn’t an illusion, so there’s no way he’s unharmed.”

“Don’t you say anymore!”

If this wound would just disappear, Conrad’s words wouldn’t be true. I try to rub it away forcefully with my finger, but there’s no way it would disappear.

“You should know.”

“Shut up!”

I grab the cup by my hand and throw it at Conrad, my ears picking up the sound of shattering pottery.

Actually it’s blatantly obvious whose explanation is more accurate. If I just calmed down and thought about it, I would find that he’s right. If the illusion wouldn’t cause harm, then there shouldn’t be a wound on my face. Sometimes your psychological state will affect your body, once you believe something without a doubt, your body will be controlled by your mind.

But even if that’s true—

“Even so...”

I bring my fist down on the table once, and don’t plan on continuing. After all the strength is already slowly draining out from my knees, it’s a bother to even stand.

The distance between him and me shouldn’t be that far, but for some reason, Conrad’s voice sounds like it’s coming from a long distance away.

“Do you think I’m a cruel man?”

“That’s right, it’s my first time thinking that.”

“I have no choice, either.”

I can’t stand this sense of powerlessness, my whole body sitting on the hard chair, my arms on the rough table surface, my face buried in my hands.

“...And you want me to do that too, right? To become a cruel man.”

“I never said that, it’s good enough for you to be yourself.”

“That’s not the same as what you said!”

“The situation this time is special, from now on we will try our best to prevent something like this from happening again.”

Footsteps approach slowly amidst the shattered pieces of pottery, a voice speaking from above my head. He stands across the table, on the ground very close to me, and continues,

“Leave the trivial matters to us. Be it me or Lord von Voltaire, or even Lord von Christ, to keep all these worries off your mind, that is the reason for our existence.”

“You sound just like Gwendal.”

“Someone has to tell you these things.”

“If so, then let Gwendal tell me! That’s more reliable, or more convincing to me!”

Lord Weller is at a loss for words.

“He’s more convincing than you, who always says you accept me, but is never by my side!”

“In that case, please pretend as though Lord von Voltaire said those words, and take them to heart.”

“I can’t do something like that!”

I take a deep breath and stop, then slowly release it, forcing out all the air in my lungs. This is to control my emotions, so I only speak after I breath out all the oxygen.

“I don’t need someone else telling me that. Throwing the annoying matters to others, and enjoying all the benefits by myself, I can’t do something that despicable, and I have no intention to.”

“That is definitely not anything despicable...”

“You said so yourself, the death of a soldier is the responsibility of the commander. That’s right, you were absolutely right.”

“But Your Majesty...”

“Listen to me! As long as I’m king, all the failures in missions are my responsibility. I don’t know other kings think, but those are my thoughts. Victory is built on everyone’s efforts, but failure is on the commander’s shoulders. Do you know why?”

“...I don’t know.”

“No matter how hard you work, it’s impossible to win on one man’s power alone, but it’s easy as pie for one person to bring everything crashing down. This is all my fault, I was too naïve, it’s my fault the town was destroyed today!”

Maybe shocked by my stubbornness, Lord Weller sighs deeply,

“It’s best if you take a short rest.”

“I will.”

I follow the walls to the door, touching the doorknob at about waist-height before turning around. The candlelight is lighting up half of Conrad’s body as he stands beside the window, just like just now.

“Conrad.”

I hear the rustle of clothes, he’s probably switching his arms around his chest.

“Did you cry?”[\[4\]](#)

He doesn’t answer.

Even after I leave the room, he doesn’t chase after me. I expected as much, even if I have no confidence in my vision, there are only two doors here, there’s no way I can’t even walk a distance of ten meters.

I open the door of the rented bedroom, walking to the window with the candle without holding on to anything. Wolfram is lying on the bed next to the window, his back facing me.

“Are you asleep?”

“Yeah.”

A muffled answer. He’s laughing at me.

“You’re lying, you wouldn’t answer if you’re sleeping!”

“That was an instinctive reaction. I realized that you’re coming to me to cry and complain again, so I had no choice but to answer you.”

“Don’t you normally pretend to sleep?”

“All I can say is I’m too nice a guy.”

Sitting on the sturdy mattress stuffed full of hay, I raise my head to look at the night sky outside the window. There’s a dim square in my pitch black field of vision, and some bright spots glowing yellow in the middle. There isn’t a moon, or any stars, only the light of a candle flame.

The wind blows against my face, carrying the smell of charred walls, sand and water. Looks like the glass on the window is broken.

“Thank goodness I still have you beside me.”

“You're being so honest about your feelings, it's sickening.”

“I don’t even have the energy to pretend anymore.”

I can tell with a touch that the bed beside me is wet. It must have been the lakewater that broke the window glass, and wet the room. Is this my punishment for failing the mission today?

“Can I sleep over there with you?”

Under the weak candlelight, a blurred Wolfram swings the thing in front of his chest,

“Günter’s here too, is that alright with you?”

“That’s really too cruel^[5].”

I start laughing to the point I can’t stop, but then my voice starts to crack, so I have no choice but to bury my face in the pillow so Wolfram won’t notice. Just like that, the dim candlelight disappears from my vision.

Surely I won’t be able to sleep through the guilt and regret.

But I must let my body rest a while. Because the life we’re living is one where we don’t know when’s the next time we can sleep on beds again.

References

1. [↑](#) This sentence may be referring to Yuuri not knowing whether Shouri did something amazing or not (he did cross between world, but only to give him glasses); or if the glasses were supposed to be something important or not. Takabayashi-sensei is actually playing with the words here and while the word for "big deal" is the one used for people (big shot); the one for "not a big deal" refers to objects.
2. [↑](#) Previously I translated it as 'seeing is believing'. This is the more literal translation.
3. [↑](#) This probably isn't in the Japanese original, but I just wanted to point it out in the TN: In Chinese, they wrote 'give up' as in lit. 'my heart has died'. I even debated for a while whether he meant 'give up' or 'despair' until I read on ;;A;;
4. [↑](#) It's probably "Did you cry?", but the first time I read it as "Do you cry?" and was like... ouch.
5. [↑](#) I love this line, that's why I translated it several times... 'Cruel' here isn't the same as what he called Conrad, it's more like 'harsh, ruthless, heartless' *etc.*

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Just as I'm about to ask why there's a light shining from the right, the surroundings are instantly dyed red, overwhelming the darkness.

I whip around in shock. After all, after what happened yesterday, I thought it was flames.

"It's the sunrise, dawn has broken."

Saralegui says tiredly. I turn to face the sunlight, covering my eyes because the brightness is too intense.

"Yuuri, the one who really wants to cover his eyes is me. I can't withstand light rays that are too intense."

"In that case, you should bring sunglasses with you."

This is my first time greeting the sunrise in a desert.

Of course I have welcomed the morning in the desert before, but in the past I was either in a building, or in front of a campfire, and I was with protectors I could trust, so no matter what the surroundings were like, I never felt uneasy.

But standing in the middle of a road in the limitless desert, and with no companions nearby, moving ahead as I face the uneasy morning—this really is my first time.

The only ones with me are two horses and Saralegui.

"But you really are surprising."

The swaying sound comes from somewhere to my left, at about the same height. If we just let the horses run at full speed, we would be able to reach our destination in within a day, but we're both amateurs when it comes to riding, so

we can allow the horses to advance slowly. After all, I'm not good at riding on my own, and with my vision still blurry, there's no way I can run full tilt.

"Surprising?"

"That's right, I'm truly very surprised. To think you could ride a horse on your own even when your eyes can't see."

"To me, you're about the same. Always putting on an 'I usually ride carriages' look."

The truth is, the same goes for me. Although I've practiced quite a few times in the city, but I'm still far from being able to ride freely and easily. Even if the horse is barely trotting, my butt will still float above the saddle, and if it speeds up a bit, my body will keep knocking into the saddle. If I really wanted to let the horse go as fast as it can, I'll probably be reduced to crying and hugging the horse's neck.

"And your suggestion, too. I didn't think you would suggest such a thing to me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Isn't it true? After all just a few hours ago, your subordinates packed me in a sack, and stuffed me into a tool closet."

"Hahaha~~" Saralegui laughs adorably, as though he's completely forgotten why he was treated that way.

"To think we're traveling alone like this again."

"This little bit of distance doesn't count as traveling, does it? It just takes a day to ride to the north-east equestrian tribe's lands."

"Traveling is traveling, an excursion is still an excursion until we're back home."

"Then bananas count as dessert, huh."

I avoid the large amounts of yellow sand trying to fly into my eyes and mouth, as I grip the ropes tightly. In the vast desert, all I see is a sea of pure white. There's a figure next to me that looks like Saralegui, but other than that I can't differentiate the sky from the earth.

“And I didn’t think you would still rely on me.”

“I’m not relying on you, this is a deal. I don’t want to owe you anything, so didn’t I say I wanted to make a deal with you?”

“True, but I haven’t decided the conditions of the deal yet, so everything up till now is all you being one-sided, right?”

“Hurry up and decide.”

“About that...”

He obviously enjoys this situation. Be it deftly avoiding the surveillance to escape the room, stealing the horses and preparing to escape, or even when I discovered him, he never once looked panicked.

Actually back then if he truly wanted to escape, he could have easily beaten me and left. After all my eyes can’t see, and I don’t have the power to stop him, but for some reason he doesn’t do that, just laughs, “How did you know it was me, Yuuri? Don’t tell me you have a mind’s eye?”

Even when he was listening to my suggestion, he was completely unfazed. Only now does he say something about feeling surprised, but that’s just talk.

“Still, your suggestion is really something. Without a certain degree in exchange, I can’t simply agree, y’know.”

“I know.”

“After all, you want me to pretend to be Yelshi.”

“Since you guys are twins, it’s worth a shot, right?”

Since setting fires and fighting is all part of the Edo spirit, then a good ol’ switcheroo tactic would naturally require twins.

Saralegui and his little brother Yelshi, look absolutely identical from every angle. In the past when they swapped identities, even Yelshi’s people in Yelshiurad couldn’t tell them apart. Besides, this is an isolated desert far from the capital, and no one has any experience serving the emperor of Seisakoku or the Shou Shimaron king at close distance.

So there’s no way we’ll be found out.

“If it’s the Emperor’s decree, the equestrian tribes would likely obey as well.”

“How should I put it? ‘This water source is mine, so stop fighting, you guys—’ or something like that?”

“Be a little more serious, would you? You are still the king of a country, at the end of the day.”

“Then why don’t you demonstrate for me, Your Majesty? You’re the king of a country too.”

The truth is, all we have to do is order the equestrian tribes with something like, “All the land in Seisakoku, including this lake, belongs to Emperor Yelshi, no one is allowed to intrude”. Those equestrian tribes fighting over the rights to the desert are also people of Seisakoku, they should listen to His Majesty the Emperor.

Although acting on our own without first consulting the Emperor himself, and in someone else’s country at that, makes me a little uncomfortable, but there’s nothing wrong with the content. That isn’t something we came up with, we’re just reaffirming something that’s a matter of fact.

While not interfering with the internal politics.

Although it does feel like we’re impersonating Master Mito Komon, thankfully our aim isn’t to eat and run.

This is the plan I spent all night coming up with. After all, it’s all my fault that the townspeople’s houses were razed to the ground, the streets flooded, and some people hurt. Everyone has suffered. I don’t think doing this can make up for anything, but it’s better than not doing anything at all.

So I discussed it over with Saralegui, about to make a run for it, and borrowed two horses, leaving the town before daylight.

The reason I didn’t bring guards with me, is so that our identities won’t be discovered. If it were just me, I could still say that I’m a traveler from a distant country, or his companion. But to Saralegui, acting as his brother Yelshi, it’d be even more cumbersome to have mazoku bodyguards.

As the shinzoku emperor, if Yelshi had mazoku soldiers with him, it would be

way too unnatural.

Once we meet the equestrian tribes, Saralegui will step up and state that he's here to observe the royal tombs and the facilities in the north, only to have separated from his guards in the middle of the forest. As for me, I'll be a follower whose eyes and throat were injured. Even if anyone suspects me, the follower with out-of-place looks, they wouldn't go as far as to challenge His Majesty the Emperor.

"But this idea of yours sure is bold, asking me to impersonate my little brother to trick the equestrian tribes."

"This isn't trickery, it's just reaffirming a fact. It's a good thing for His Majesty the Emperor as well."

"Who knows? If we were discovered, the one Yelshi scolds would be me. Looks like I have to ask for an appropriate price in return."

"Have you decided?"

"Mn—"

Saralegui seems to be fairly frustrated, muttering to himself. After a deliberate pause, the condition he finally comes up with for the deal is somehow very abstract.

"It should be life, right?"

"Life?"

"That's right, life. If it was a certain someone's life, I might be able to make the deal."

Shocked, I can't help but ask,

"Whose?"

"That depends."

And then he laughs.

What idiotic idea is this obstinate boy king harboring now?

"Anyway, why don't you guys stay in Shou Shimaron for a few days first. After that I'll figure out how we're going to play properly."

“That’s why I’m asking you, who...”

But this will have to wait.

Because on the sand dune in front of us, there are a few swaying shadows.

“It’s the equestrian tribe.”

Saralegui says in a small voice.

“Sara, how many are there? Can you see? Do you know which tribe they’re from?”

“Four, five, six... Six of them, but I don’t know which tribe. That part is really very hard to differentiate, if only we could tell from the color of the clothes.”

They’re wearing hooded cloaks that float in the wind, and feel just like residents of a desert would. But the Seisakoku deserts aren’t hot, there’s foolproof insulation from the cold underneath that material flying in the wind. Apparently the cloaks aren’t just for decoration, sometimes they can be used as carpets, other times as tents, or even scarves.

It’s just that they don’t use different colors according to their different groups. Even if they’re from the same tribe, they can still wear white, or other non-colored material. It seems that anything pale-colored goes.

For some reason Saralegui looks exhilarated, grabbing my arm as he says,

“What to do, are we going to start fighting? Are you going to perform that kind of shocking magic from last night?”

"I won't do something so reckless again."

“But at this rate we’ll be captured.”

“That will be even better for us. Rather than walking slowly like this, we can reach their base faster. Listen up, when we get to their place you must call yourself Yelshi, or there’s no guarantee they won’t suddenly come at us with knives.”

How rare it is, for my judgment to be so accurate.

Faced with Saralegui calling himself the Seisakoku emperor, the equestrian people don’t dare to do anything rash. Because those folks don’t if Saralegui is

the real thing or a phony. Besides, for these people living in poverty far from the city, most of them go their entire lives without seeing the king's true face even once.

Even if someone here has seen their country's emperor before, the likelihood of them calling our bluff is really low. Because the boy king of Shou Shimaron and the young emperor of Seisakoku look exactly the same.

Those guys treat Yelshi... no, they treat Yelshi-impersonator Saralegui with a ton of respect. Sending water, even offering fruits to His Majesty the Emperor, exhausted and having barely escaped with his life. In order to not seem rude, they even let him ride an old horse, bringing him to their home.

A follower whose eyes and throat are hurt like me, is nothing more than cargo to them. And as 'cargo' means, I'm pushed onto a large horse that's uncomfortable to ride, following the north-west equestrian people back to their home. Since my character has a wounded throat, I can't complain or yell. Though even if I could speak, they wouldn't understand my grievances.

The one that pisses me off even more is Saralegui, who doesn't utter a word at the treatment I'm receiving. If he was just a little bit better to his follower, he would at least say some nice things for me.

The place where the equestrian people live is fairly different from the oasis town.

There aren't any buildings here, just a camp consisting of simple tents made from a frame and cloth. They should have some things to block the wind and the sand inside, but I can't tell how they survive the chill of the nights. Compared to the town of bricks, all I can say is they live very simply.

But there are benefits of this, too. Once they get wind of an enemy attack, they can immediately pack up and move. Even if there was a fire, their homes wouldn't be too badly damaged. Because only God can take away something that never existed in the first place.

It must be Saralegui's first time seeing a camp of tents, his narration obviously

rather excited,

“How shocking, Yuuri! It’s a bunch of tents! To think people could actually live in these things! This kind of space is narrow and thin, you could hear everything from next door perfectly clearly too, there’s no secrecy whatsoever. Oh, right, have you stayed in this kind of house before?”

Although his non-stop ranting is annoying, but he is the master after all, and I’m the follower, so I can only keep listening to him obediently. A lot of Japanese high school boys have camping experience, so I’m not surprised by this collection of tents. This is just like him, that’s why I feel greenhouse flowers are so hard to deal with.

“There are over a hundred of them!”

Over a hundred... That is rather large scale.

By the time he says that, I’m also thrown onto the ground. Before this I was treated as cargo, and carried by six strong men. If they threw me just a little further ahead, at least there would be something that looks like a brown mattress. Thanks to them, the sandy ground breaks the skin on my chin.

Since I can’t see the afternoon sunlight, I deduce that I’m now in a tent. The man standing in front of me is saying something in a loud voice, and of course he’s not speaking in the common language. Saralegui replies, but he’s speaking in Seisakoku language, so I don’t understand that either.

Damn, this is so inconvenient. Doesn’t this camp have any translators!? Only now do I finally understand Mr Ajira’s importance.

“Where’s the person in charge here!?”

Saralegui suddenly uses the common language, and I can’t help but raise my head to look at him, thinking this is some sort of signal. Anyway his words tell me that the man in front of us isn’t the person in charge.

“Sara, there’s no need to talk to anyone who’s not the chief! Our final ace must only be shown at the most critical moment.”

“That’s strange, I thought you can’t talk?”

“Ah!”

Crap, I forget my throat was supposed to be hurt.

“How about we say you’re a teenager from a different country that I hired? Not only is that closer to our true relationship, it’s easier for you to act out too.”

“...I’m starting to understand what you think me as better and better.”

“Then let me explain, my follower. This man says just a few days ago he was still the top gun in this camp, but a few days ago the legendary messiah showed up, so he willingly suggested handing over the power to the messiah, only that man doesn’t seem to have accepted yet. Goodness~~ To think there are still legends of messiahs and all that.”

When I think of messiah legends, three super famous people pop up in my head. Other than them, I really can’t think of anyone else. That’s right, it’s those people from the messiah legend of the century—Kenshiro and Amiba and Heart. All you can see are bulging muscles, muscles, muscles, as well as scattering tendons. Oh, right, and there’s another one called Raoh too^[1].

“Mm, ha—”

“What’s the matter, Yuuri?”

“N-nothing.”

The extreme envy almost made me drool unconsciously.

“If so, let’s ask this chief and the person pretending to retire, who we should tell His Majesty the Emperor’s decree to.”

“Of course I’ve asked. In the end he said they’re drumming up stuff...”

“Drumming?”

Drumming, drumming, drumming... It couldn’t be the younger sister of a cat-shaped robot from the future^[2], right? Then they must be drumming up resources. Could it be that the legendary messiah is preparing a feast?

“What I mean is they want to treat to me to dinner.”

“Eh, wait a sec. It should be ‘us’, right?”

“No—”

Sara slowly shakes his head and says,

“Apparently they’re going to have a banquet to welcome the Emperor of Seisakoku, His Majesty Yelshi. As for you, my follower, it seems you can’t attend.”

Crap, at this point of the plan, my part of a follower is having an opposite effect. From the start I should have set it as ‘a close bosom friend who for some reason is following the Shou Shimaron king’ instead.

The sky suddenly becomes dark, so I know I’m in a tent.

As the saying goes, the autumn sun drops... No, the autumn sun sets quickly, but I never asked what season this country is currently undergoing, so I can’t confirm if the sun really did drop quickly.

Saralegui, impersonating the Emperor of Seisakoku Yelshi, is talking up a storm with the current chief as they walk to the large tent where the banquet will be held. On the other hand, I get the complete opposite treatment, some soldiers carrying me over their shoulders like when we arrived to another tent, as though I could be tossed into the sky at any time.

The people carrying me keep chanting, “Messiah, messiah.” This is the Seisakoku word I just learned.

“W-wait a sec, guys! What is up with this messiah legend? Why am I carried around like cargo? Is Amiba here to blow his flute!?”

They carry me to a tent full of fragrances, and throw me onto the ground just like before. this time there’s more than just a brown mat, my chin even touches oily fur.

The equestrian people are still yelling messiah, messiah.

They tie up my arms, and then tie the rope to the wooden furniture before leaving.

I feel around with my hands, looks like this is the leg of a table. There are four chairs around the rough and sturdy table, in other words, I’m tied in an

unfamiliar room like a dog.

Maybe this is still slightly better than Saralegui, who was tied onto a bed last night. If there were handcuffs cuffed to the table, I could even play detective. There might even be a nice detective sending me pork chop rice. Hey—Yamada, bring the pork chop rice!

...Who the hell am I playing detective with?

I turn my face to the right, where something seems to be moving on what looks like a bed. Looks like someone else got here first, but no matter how I look at it, it doesn't seem to be a person.

That thing is completely round in appearance, with nothing long and slender like a person's limbs. Is it a caterpillar? Or a cocoon? But it's too big. Besides, are there really oddballs in the world that would treat a huge caterpillar as a pet? So worrying, that's way too worrying.

Other than the bad visibility, this dark tent isn't a comfortable place no matter how you look at it. I can't see clearly, but since I got nothing better to do, I just keep staring at the top of the bed.

Maybe it's just me, but I keep feeling as though that thing is getting smaller and smaller.

The owner of this room wakes up suddenly one morning, and finds he's turned into a huge caterpillar... Are these non-scientific phenomena actually possible or not?

Because my mind is full of things like that, I don't notice the footsteps crunching on the sand.

The thing that pulls me back to reality isn't the sound of the men entering the tent, but the aroma that comes with them. That's the smell of bread, fresh out of the oven, and meat roasted with a lot of herbs, and the slightly charred aroma of vegetables, drizzled with cheese then cooked until they melt in your mouth.

The smells fill the entire tent, moving me to a daze. To a malnourished brat like me who hasn't anything decent in almost a week, this is murder to my eyes... No, murder to my nose.

“Hey!”

The man who seems to be the owner of the house makes a sound that scares me out of my wits, but that voice is very familiar. Problem is, I don't know any equestrian people.

In other words, I'm hallucinating due to the hunger. Goodness, malnourishment is scary.

Maybe it's because I didn't answer, the man repeats once more,

“Why are you here?”

Crap, I really feel as though I know him. This voice that can travel so far even during a competition is...

I raise my head, trying to get a better look at his face. But the tent is a bit dim during evening, plus my vision is still on holiday, so unlike during the day, I can't even tell where he's standing.

“You couldn't be the muscle... Adalbert, could you?”

“Who else could it be. And where are you looking? Brat... Don't tell me?”

I sense Adalbert holding his breath in his surprise.

“Don't tell me you can't see? How did it get to this?”

I want to know, too.

References

1. [↑](#) All characters from the manga Fist of the North Star.
2. [↑](#) Reference Doraemon's sister, Dorami, so I chose the words 'drumming up'... Direct translation would be closer to buying, purchasing or maybe even shopping.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

I didn't think that me losing my sight is even more surprising to Adalbert than me showing up in the middle of the desert.

When three people put dishes laden with food on the table, he's pacing on the sandy ground covered with only a mat, asking again, "Why are you here?"

So I tell him about what happened at the oasis a few days ago, and explain all about coming to the equestrian tribe stronghold—all while there's a feast in front of me. To a starving high school student, this is basically an interrogation.

Once he finally finishes hearing out my tales of heroism, Adalbert kicks the table leg angrily. The impact spreads to me, making my wounded shoulder and palm hurt like hell.

"Damn, how did it get to this? I only came here to get a look because I heard there was some rare ingredient, to think this chunk of meat is actually a clueless mazoku brat!"

"Ingredient!?"

So the equestrian people who carried me here to excitedly think I'm tonight's dinner? No wonder they were so excited.

"Even I don't know if this is lucky or unlucky."

"On the other hand, what kind of meat do you mean by meat? Seisakoku doesn't have such a bloody culture, do they?"

"No, no, the equestrian tribes don't have such a culture."

The muscleman waves his hand in denial, causing a huge gust of wind. His muscles are surely swaying too.

"Apparently the West considers people with black hair and eyes a delicacy for

immortality, you should have heard about that, right?”

“So it’s a delicacy... Can’t believe it’s not a miracle medicine.”

To think that after living seriously for sixteen years, I’ll be treated as an ingredient. Right now I can finally understand how the deer and monkeys in the Chinatown market feel like, they’re surely absolutely tearful as well. But that’s all my fault for not disguising myself properly.

Maybe it’s because Adalbert gave an order, one of the equestrian people unties the bonds on my hands. They’re moving the food, so I assume they’re the equestrian people in charge of preparing food and beverage.

“Anyway, sit down first.”

“Mn...”

The truth is I don’t really want to approach the dinner table. The reason is simple, faced with so many delicious dishes, I’m just not confident I can stand it. Seeing my hesitation, Adalbert bursts out in laughter,

“Relax, I won’t stop you from eating!”

“Eh, really?”

“That’s right, I’ve already fed the ‘luggage’ over there anyway, it doesn’t make a difference.”

What luggage? Don’t tell me he treats that round thing on the bed as luggage? I really can’t agree with that, Adalbert, even your bed sheets are part of your family—but before I get to lecture him, my attention is inevitably drawn to the steaming hot food.

“I can really eat? You won’t wait until later only to tell me I have to pay fifteen thousand in service fees?”

“I won’t, sheesh.”

As soon as I hear his reply, I say ‘itadakimasu’ in my heart. But my hand stops, just at that moment.

Because I can’t see.

I know the food is right in front of me, I just have to reach out my hand to feel

the heat, and I reach down to touch the warm plates. But with night approaching, and there being only a brazier in the room, forget the food on the plates, I don't even know where the cutlery is.

The huge shadow sitting opposite me tilts slightly, maybe he's cocking his head.

"What's the matter? Aren't you hungry? Or are you a vegetarian?"

"Of course not! I'm so hungry my head's spinning, meat and fish are my utmost favorites!! It's just that, hold on... Ugh—Where's the spork?"

"Oh, right, you can't see."

Adalbert grabs my hand and moves it ten centimeters to the side.

"The meat fork is here."

"Thanks."

But I can't return his friendliness. Holding the equestrian people's fork... they might not have sporks here, huh... I try to challenge the middle of the plate, and as expected the results are disastrous.

The fork doesn't sink into anything. What a shame, let's try again. The second time I feel it poking into food, but the food falls off on the way to my mouth. The third time the fork scratches against the cutlery, resulting in a sharp screech that makes me want to hold my ears.

Disappointed, I hold my head low with the fork in my hand.

"Whoa—"

Adalbert says in a tone of extreme respect,

"You're so classy, 'Your Majesty', purposely using a meat fork even when eating this sort of countryside food. Sorry, I for one have lived in the wild for too long, so I just grab the food with my hands."

"Eh, grab with my hands?"

"That's right, this is a dish of wild and tasty finger food. I made it, so I'm surely right when I say that."

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Adalbert immediately reaches his hand

out for the plate in front of him, and I only know that when I hear some light hand noises. But I stare at his shadow in surprise too, watching him bring the soft meat to his mouth with his hands, even making chewing sounds.

“How’s that, you don’t have to put on such an act with the meat fork, just take big bites like a man.”

“Then please pretend you never saw this.”

“That’s the smart way. If you did something like this in front of that man who’s forever dripping, I bet he’d faint from the shock, huh? Oh, yeah, why don’t you pick up the plate? Although that looks worse, but anyway we’re at the edge of a desert like this, there’s no need to talk about customs or manners here.”

I bring the food to my mouth as he told me too, and a sweetness mixed with many ingredients immediately melts apart on my mouth. The thick soup slides down my throat, aromas and flavors lingering. It feels as though rather than sliding into my stomach, everything rises to the top of my head.

This is the happiness I’ve awaited for so long, that of once again experiencing how it feels like to eat.



“Chef, this is just too delicious. Is this fresh butter? Or yogurt with a tinge of sourness?”

“Yogurt? No, that’s kefir fermented milk.”

“Wait a sec, why would there be kefir in Seisakoku... Ow!”

The edge of the plate touches my wound, and my brow creases with the pain. I want to press the wound with my left hand, but Adalbert seems to have taken note of everything, I didn’t expect him to have such a considerate side despite being so buff.

“Hm, what’s the matter with your palm?”

“...Just a light injury.”

In truth it’s not a light injury, and the wound doesn’t seem to have closed yet either, so it hurts like hell whenever I hold something. But this is all my fault, so there’s no reason for me to complain.

“It must be because you simply used a short sword you’re not used to, and overexerted yourself so you got cut, right? It’s a common novice mistake.”

“Guess so.”

Amused, Adalbert chuckles once, and then I hear the chair opposite making a sound.

“Let me heal it for you.”

“Eh?”

“I said, I’ll help you heal that wound right now.”

If it’s true, I really couldn’t ask for more. But how was he going to heal it? Besides I’m not that close with him either, so I don’t know if he’s just being kind without asking for anything in return. Should he ask for some reward, the me right now really can’t give him anything.

“Look at you, all suspicious, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten who I am?”

“Aren’t you Adalbert? Lord von Grantz Adalbert...”

“Wrong.”

He reaches out his body for the end of the table, his voice becoming very close.

“I’m not Lord von Grantz, but Grantz. Not a mazoku soldier or an aristocrat, just Adalbert Grantz. Unlike you and His Excellency the third son, I can’t use convenient majutsu, because I’m not mazoku.”

“Come to think of it...”

Wolfram and I have suffered at the hands of Adalbert’s houjutsu before. And even earlier before that, when I still couldn’t tell left from right, nor did I know of the skies and seas, it was also this man who played around with my brain. It was thanks to him that I can understand the language here.

“You’re perfectly fine, even on shinzoku land.”

“That’s right, now do you want to be healed or not?”

“Of course...”

“Alright, then give me your hand.”

He holds my hand, recently freed from its rope bonds, and pulls it towards him.

“Put your hand on my chest... Ah, hey, hey, don’t touch the nipple! Don’t go simply touching!”

“Waa, sorry!”

Murmuring “really, even though it’s through the clothes you shouldn’t simply touch”, Adalbert puts my hand on top of those enviable chest muscles, near his collarbone.

“Listen up.”

Before I can ask, “listen to what?” I already hear the powerful heartbeat. Technically I shouldn’t be able to hear a person’s heartbeat directly with my ears, but it echoes in my head through my palm, and brings with it a wave of heat. After that is the impact, finally the power that fixes my body.

But this healing process comes with intense pain. That wave of heat tears apart the closing wound, cutting through the veins before seeping in slowly through the wound. Of course all this is just a feeling, when in fact the wound doesn’t widen or bleed.

That power seeps from my left palm to the arm, even running over to the injured right shoulder.

I can't help but yell pathetically.

"It hurts..."

"Try to bear with it."

"Majutsu is gentler than this!"

"Is that so? To humans houjutsu is gentler, but the fact that you find it painful proves that you're closer to mazoku."

"How can that... Ow!"

There's an intense pain like an electric shock, and I pull my hand back subconsciously, my body falling backwards together with the chair from the knockback. But the back of my head doesn't hit the floor.

This is all thanks to the people who burst through the cloth screen into the tent.

Conrad holds up the chair from behind, Hazel grabs my hand to prevent me from sliding off, while Wolfram points at Adalbert and says in a voice on the verge of losing it,

"Adalbert! What are you doing in a equestrian tribe tent!?"

"You should ask yourself that, Your Excellency the third son."

I don't blame him for being so surprised.

So sorry you had to get mixed up in this rookie mission.

Conrad and Wolfram planned to follow us from the start.

After the deep blow to the plan I came up with myself, even if I wanted to leave the town and act on my own, that is still just too rash. However, if you tell me to helplessly face the destroyed town, then leave without a care after even its water supply had been monopolized by others—Well, I can't do something like that either.

So after lying dejectedly on the damp bed, this is the plan I came up with.

Have Saralegui impersonate Yelshi, and then announce to the chief of the equestrian tribe—

All the land on this country belongs to Emperor Yelshi, even the water supply in the desert is Emperor Yelshi's property, so no one is allowed to trespass or fight for domination over it.

To allow Saralegui to impersonate the emperor of Seisakoku, I have no choice but to go alone with him. After all, it's not natural for the shinzoku emperor to have mazoku guards with him, no matter how you look at it.

Because of that I talked things over with Conrad and Wolfram, hoping they would agree to the two of us going alone, but the two mazoku were worried about the high probability of danger when we're without a single guard.

That's why I asked them to follow behind us at a distance they wouldn't be noticed.

They appeared as promised.

The trustworthy guide Hazel Guides came along too.

Everyone else stayed behind in the town to help with healing and reconstruction.

Adalbert doesn't stand up, just looks sideways at Wolfram, who's huffing in anger,

"If you get too mad you'll go bald, y'know, Your Excellency the third son."

"Shut up, mind your own business!"

It occurs to me that Hazel Graves doesn't know Adalbert, so I took it upon myself to introduce them.

"Hazel, he is Adalbert."

"A hunk that looks like an American footballer."

"Thanks for the compliment, old hag."

"...To think he knows he was being complimented."

She did say it in English.

“Explain yourself to me loud and clear, Grantz!”

“Yes yes yes, I’m sorry, Mr Captain.”

The captain of the ‘Find Me Team’? So Wolfram is the captain, that really makes me deeply thoughtful.

“Although some menial thing like this isn’t worth reporting to Your Majesty the Maou, it seems I am the messiah.”

“Messiah--!?”

Wolfram and I yell at the same time.

The messiah who, according to what Saralegui heard from the chief, showed up a few days ago is actually Adalbert... Wait a sec, why is he the messiah? Because he’s a muscleman? Because he’s an American footballer? Because he’s a quarterback? If he wasn’t the messiah, but instead a helper sent from the Alliance, I would understand that better.

The two equestrian tribe officials standing on the sounds hold moldy paper in their hands, yelling in unison and even pointing their finger towards somewhere that fits the conditions.

“Apocalypse!”

“Apocalypse!”

Hazel translates it just for me.

“Apocalypse, the messiah legend?”

“What apocalypse, that’s too pessimistic. On the other hand, what kind of guy is that messiah? Where did he come from, and where is he going?”

“Hold on, my farsightedness has gotten worse recently. Uh—The messiah who comes from the sea has blue eyes and a strong chin, a handsome man carrying a seductive mermaid...”

“Strong chin?”

“Seductive mermaid?”

“Eh—So it’s nothing to do with musclemen, huh—”

Conrad, Wolfram and I, the three of us are surprised by different things.

Even if the strong chin is a characteristic Adalbert was born with, but what’s up with the seductive mermaid part? Could it be he’s not happy with his muscles, and even tried to grow a fishtail?

The scene is suddenly dead quiet, it seems I’m the only one out of the loop. Conrad and Wolfram probably found the answer, both looking at the same thing.

“Eh--!? What what? What did you discover—Tell me, sheesh—”

“Conrad, do you think that’s a mermaid?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Aren’t you better versed with that kind of thing?”

What kind of thing are you versed with, huh, Conrad.

“Speaking of which, are there mermaids here? Is it okay for mermaids to stay on such a dry desert!?”

“...If you want to say being all tied up is seductive, I guess that counts.”

“Maybe it’s the hair.”

“No, it might actually be the beard, the beard.”

“Beard? Do mermaids have beards!?”

Hazel, who has no interest in mermaids or perhaps saw them long ago, ignores our unease and continues,

“The messiah who came from the sea, saves the wind, saves the earth, saves the fire, saves the goldfish^[1]... Ah, that’s wrong, saves the gold, saves the water, saves the tombs, saves the people, saves the fish, saves the insects...”

Putting aside the goldfish fishing for now, he even has to save the insects!? Feels like a SOHO worker who accepts any CASE on the spot-- I can’t help but start pitying this messiah.

“Anyway, since I came from the sea while carrying something that looked like a mermaid, I’ve been treated as the messiah. Whatever, since it feels really

relaxing, and since I've already been identified as the messiah, there's nothing I can do about it either. So I was thinking of taking the honorary title for a day, only before I know it it's been five days."

Honorary title, huh, I imagine him wearing a ribbon that reads, "Messiah for the Day".

"Since I was taken to be the legendary man, naturally I'm treated quite well, but these guys really have terrible food and drinks. Drinking wine as bland as water, eating dried fruits and bread that can't be any harder, it's just too much... By the time I realized it, I'm already in the kitchen making food for the whole tribe."

"In other words, you ran all the way here to Seisakoku to save the insects suffering in the desert?"

Adalbert taps the tabletop.

"Hey, have you been listening closely at all?"

"But how did you get here? I know, you used the convenient tools Anissina made to get here, right? Like the Anywhere Door or Bamboo Copter^[2]."

I suffered quite a bit before reaching here, so I have mixed feelings about someone getting here so easily. But the chair under Adalbert's butt makes a sound, and he shouts in surprise,

"What? Didn't you tell him?"

He seems to be addressing Wolfram.

"I came here with His Excellency the third son to find you."

"You're a member of the 'Find Me Team!?' If that's so, how did you end up as a messiah-cum-head chef in an unknown tribe?"

Just because he was hugging a mermaid.

How mysterious, how dazzling must a mermaid be, to mess up the life of an American footballer muscleman? Damn—I really want to see, I wonder, between it and Denmark's Little Mermaid statue, which is more beautiful?

References

- 1. [↑](#) lit. goldfish fishing, like at festivals XD
- 2. [↑](#) Sing with me: Dora-e-monn~

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

This is completely unexpected.

He knew from the start he could get to this world this way, otherwise he would never make such a serious gamble. Murata Ken relaxes his tightly-gripped left hand. Although it's now a completely cooled metal piece, but some of the special figures still scalded his palm.

Still, it's basically a miracle that he only got this hurt. Murata thinks back to that moment, and his body trembles despite himself.

Back then, the sky and earth had completely switched around, the grass and trees that were completely normal just a second ago swaying like underwater plants. The world turned ninety degrees, all the straight lines becoming curved. The metal shard used the power of the fire and the explosion to return to where the Box is, while he just hitched on for a ride, and successfully made it to the world his friend is in.

Back then the fire enveloping him had darted upwards in a spiral, so it wasn't long before his clothes and hair started burning as well. The heat suffocated him, and his limbs felt as though they were being sliced by thousands of knives.

But Murata knew he wasn't dead, so even if the heat was enough to burn his skin, he still faced it calmly.

That was how he came to the world his friend, Shibuya Yuuri, is in, and without kicking the bucket. Other than some light scalding, he doesn't have any other obvious external injuries. His spectacles, on the other hand, had cracked, so they can't really be used anymore.

Shibuya, next time you really must take me with you. This tour was seriously tough to handle, I don't want to use this method anymore.

The real terror is afterwards.

Of course it's a good thing that he made it to the other world with all his limbs intact, but he has absolutely no idea where this is. The metal piece he relied on is part of the Box's decoration, so theoretically it should return to where the Box Hazel Graves kept in the Boston suburb, 'Inferno on the Tundra', is. So that's where he expected to show up.

The problem is he had no way to find out where the pivotal 'Inferno on the Tundra' is in this world, and couldn't find any clues on Earth either.

The moment he 'dropped', the things that appeared in front of him are stone walls and floor. Add that with the white-blue light emitted by the shard in his hand, he has time to observe his surroundings. But the light is vanishing soon, so he has to prepare light before that, at the very least he needs to be able to see after this.

Murata looks around him, searching for something he could use, but suddenly he finds himself speechless. Although there are many different types of experiences in his memories, but well-versed as he is, he's still shocked into wide-eyed, slack-jawed silence.

This is a room surrounded by ancient stone walls.

The ceiling is really low, making a stone of room of about ten meters squared. But what surprises him isn't the walls or the ceiling, but the cube in the middle of the room.

To say he was used to seeing it would be inaccurate, but the 'Inferno on the Tundra' from his memories is very close to where he's kneeling on the ground. Perhaps it's reacting to the shard it lost and found again, so the metal sides are even glowing slightly. The cover on top is shut tight, so it won't cause any harm for now.

But when he moves his gaze back to the center, he notices that there's something even longer in front him, and it's made with a different type of stone from the wall. According to his instincts, or rather, his common sense--

That's a coffin.

And a stone coffin , too, which means this here is...

“Someone’s tomb, huh. Waa!”

Murata can’t help but crease his brow, instinctively holding his breath and covering his mouth with the hand that wasn’t scalded. He holds up for twenty seconds before realizing there was no point overreacting now. There are many things that look like rags decorating the room, but he knows immediately that’s not simply cloth. In truth there’s no need to identify anything anyway, he can tell from a glance that those are squatting bodies, and they’ve become mummies, who knows how long they’ve been in this room. They were probably buried here to die together with the owner of the coffin, a common tradition throughout history.

At first he thought this might be the tomb of a king or someone with a certain amount of authority, but since the followers were also placed in the same room, the person in the coffin must not have been as big a deal as he thought. Maybe a concubine, a dowager, or a prince with no rights of succession.

But how did the Box get here?

He sees that there’s something like a wooden bat on the shoulder of the mummy by the wall, so he takes it down carefully. He’s not afraid of ancient bodies, he just doesn’t want to simply damage historical artifacts. Still, he smiles wryly and thinks to himself, “Forgive me for taking this stick, but who should I apologize to?”

The light from the metal piece starts to dim, so he lights up the complimentary matches from the café that he kept in his pocket. The dry wood immediately catches fire, and the room lights up too.

He confirms again that the cover of the Box is closed really tightly, but the cover of the coffin is open. He tries peeking inside, and it’s exactly as he imagined.

The difference between this and the mummies as he understands them, is that the corpse was not completely preserved. The owner of his soul from who knows how many generations ago was somewhat related to Egypt, that’s how he knows about these things. Different areas have different methods of handling things, and there aren’t bandages on this body either.

All the jewelry on the body were completely cleaned out, so all that remains is

a naked corpse. That makes Murata heave a sigh of relief, though. Since the corpse doesn't have treasures adorning it, it proves this tomb was raided before.

Since there were tomb raiders here before, there must be an entrance they used to get in. Of course there was no way he could dig his way out from inside without tools, but a gang of raiders with time and manpower wouldn't find it too hard to dig a tunnel from outside in.

"But I never thought I would come to this sort of place—"

Looking for an exit everywhere and planning to get away as soon as possible, Murata voices his current feelings.

"At first I was worried what I'd do if I ended up at the mouth of a volcano or in the sea, to think it's actually a royal tomb, how completely unexpected."

If someone were to reply him in this sort of place, that would surely be terrifying, but the surroundings are too quiet, giving him the strong urge to talk. Because if he didn't, there's a high chance he would collapse under the unease.

Since he's already made it safely to the other world, the fear and unease in his heart has also taken a different direction. At first he was worried he wouldn't be able to make it with all his limbs, but now he has to worry about something else. The problem he faces now is whether or not he can leave this ancient tomb, and successfully find Shibuya Yuuri.

Even if he finds the tomb raiders exit and makes it out of the tomb, he still has no way of knowing what kind of place it is outside. The style of the tomb here is different from Shin Makoku, so it must be another country, but he has no clue, and no way of finding out which country on this continent he's in.

Not knowing his current location makes him really uneasy. He could very well be on an unknown land very far away from Yuuri, maybe even across the sea.

At first he hoped to meet him again, chat, walk side by side and laugh together, then use the information he knows to assist Yuuri.

If that hope couldn't be realized, then there's no point in him coming to this world.

Murata kicks the wall in anger. Among the owners of his soul are a doctor, a

starlet, a baker, even a convict in prison, and people who make their living on the edge of the law. Although he has the memories of many different lives, he just has to lack a tomb raider or archeologist.

“Where on earth is the way out of here?”

Although he finds a suspicious-looking hole, it’s only large enough for one person to crawl inside. Would those tomb raiders hugging their loot leave through such a small entrance? If it really is this hole, then they would definitely take whatever they could, and make many trips. But at the same time, he can’t be sure where the pitch black hole leads.

He turns around to look at the Box hidden in the coffin, thankfully no one touched it. It’s all because the entrance was too small, that’s why the tomb raiders didn’t take it out. The light on the sides of the Box have dimmed, after he leaves this place, the stone room would most likely return to how it was, and once more be filled with darkness and silence.

Murata murmurs to himself,

“You just stay there forever.”

Kneeling on the icy cold ground, covered in dust.

But I’m leaving.

Really—Why didn’t you guys become tomb raiders?

Murata wants to throw a tantrum at the previous owners of his soul. Since they had all sorts of different career experiences, at the very least they should have broken into the Leaning Tower of Pisa once. Thinking of that, he sighs again,

“The Leaning Tower of Pisa isn’t a tomb... Then they should have broken into the Great Pyramid of Giza.”

Murata walks on the slanted surface, muttering away under his breath. Since his spectacles had cracked, the difference in the vision between his two eyes frustrated him.

He stops and takes off his glasses, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, but his whole body smells charred, and his burnt hair had also curled up.

Holding up the wooden stick in place of a torch in front of his eyes, he tries to check how long he's been walking. It's only natural he's tired, if his watch wasn't faulty, he should have walked for four hours. The light source in his hands having been replaced by a wooden stick, although he's quite out of breath from the walking, and his knees hurt a lot too, it's lucky he didn't use up too much heat. In fact, the insides of this huge tomb are actually a little cold.

There's a slight odor of dust in the air, but it doesn't hamper his breathing. Although he doesn't believe in Tutankhamen's Curse or anything, he was rather worried when he opened the coffin. For example there might have been some unknown bacteria or something in the coffin to prevent tomb raiders from breaking in.

But having breathed the air here for four hours, he doesn't feel any strange symptoms, only the quickened heart rate and heavy breathing that comes with long term exercise.

His body was never suited for long distance walking, so that feeling of weariness is all the more intense. If it was Yuuri, he could probably even frog-jump up this sort of gentle slope.

As he walks, Murata thinks hard on how to escape this huge tomb. He carefully observes his surroundings, trying to find any structure similar to ruins on Earth. Like a pyramid or Emperor Nintoku's tomb... No, even Daisen-Kofun^[1] didn't take up this much space. No matter how much he considers it he doesn't know how long he's been climbing, he just feels a lot like a train climbing up a slope on a Z-shaped track.

And if he just keeps to the main roads, his chances of survival aren't high. Logically speaking, after the people who built this tomb put the rulers' corpses to rest, they would have sealed up the tomb so even the tiniest bug couldn't fly in. So what he's looking for is the entrance the tomb raiders dug, and that's why he would dart into anything at all that looks like a hole to try and see if it connects to the outside world.

"This is the seventh one."

Hands on his hips, Murata starts mumbling to himself again, and then he bend backwards just once forcefully before bending down and crawling into a hole, its height requiring him to crawl on his belly to get through.

The hole he had crawled through earlier led into a treasure room. He crouched down and followed the firelight forward, trying to confirm if there was a path behind the wall. But all he saw was some gold in the corner of the room, and the gems fixed into the wall sparkling in the light. This should be the treasures the raiders didn't take away.

Although he found the royal treasures, he felt unexpectedly dejected.

As the ceiling gets lower and lower, the uneasiness in his heart increases non-stop too. Although he tries his best to stop himself from thinking too much, there would still be some sort of terror lingering. Even if he concentrates hard to forget it, that terror still won't go away.

So he thinks about his friend. Thinking about the places they went together in the past, and worrying about how Yuuri is doing now, trying to forget about the dangers threatening him now. But as he advances in this pose, he finds his mind occupied with his family.

Small things, like "they probably won't call my phone, right", "when's the next time Father comes home", and "the soy sauce bottle on the table is close to empty".

To Murata, the fact that he's thinking about these things is in fact very surprising. He doesn't hate his parents, and it's not like his familial relationships are terrible, it's just that he never seems to remember his parents' faces when he's in danger.

"This just goes to show that my family is surprisingly full of familial love."

When he finally gets past the narrow tunnel, he reaches a small open area that can fit about six tatami mats. But besides the tunnel he crawled through, there's also a large road made of granite stretching in three directions. The sheer scale and grandeur of it are completely different from the 'cave' just now, so wide it's easy for him to walk even with his arms spread wide.

This is the first time he came across something like this in his life.

Which road should he choose? In other words, out of the three roads, which one leads outside? Or should he avoid the three available large roads, and look for another small tunnel? To be honest, he has no idea what to do.

Murata stands on the spot, holding his head wordlessly. His head really hurts, it's probably because his vision is affected by his glasses cracking.

"Ugh—Don't tell me the tombs are connected?"

He troubles over it for quite some time, and decides to take the path by the left-side wall. Thirty steps, if after thirty steps there is still more road ahead he would return to the original spot and think it over again. After setting that rule he starts counting his steps, one, two, three, four...

"...Forty-eight."

He overshot.

There's a reason he broke the rule he just set, because when he was approaching thirty steps, the road ahead of him suddenly broke off, replaced by steps going downward. No matter how he squints he can't see the end of it, it seems to head somewhere somewhat deep.

"This way... Wouldn't I have climbed all this way for nothing?"

If it were the usual Murata, he probably wouldn't have been tricked. If at this time there wasn't a swaying light in the distance below, he would have turned around directly and looked for a different path. But what is with that light?

"Is it the exit?"

He walks down the stairs carefully, step by step. If anything went wrong, he just had to climb up again. And the air here is very clean, so there aren't any dangerous traps. After staying here for four hours, he is sure that this tomb is like heaven to tomb raiders.

Murata spends ten minutes to get to the bottom, but that's because the stone stairs are narrow and steep. When he reached the last step, his knees even shake non-stop embarrassingly. Although he keeps on walking without stopping, the swaying light doesn't grow larger at all. But that's not surprising either, after all that light isn't a candle or a torch, but the light coming through a crack of about

two centimeters in the granite wall.

But just the facts that there's a crack in the wall and light on the other side, can be counted as a miracle.

Faced with this unexpected discovery, Murata stands frozen on the spot, thinking 'so this is how it feels like when your mind goes blank', and there are even the sounds of people pacing on the other side of the wall.

"Eh? Hey! Hey—"

He immediately regains his cool, placing his face to the wall and yelling. Looking through the less damaged lens on his glasses, he only sees some figures with their backs against the light, but it's obvious there are people there. Without waiting for their response, Murata reaches his hand into the crack, using all his strength to try and pry it open. He thinks to himself, 'For all you know this could be a door.'

"Open the door, help me!"

He keeps yelling in Japanese, English, and the common language of this world. The people on the other end of the wall don't try to hide their movements at all, immediately picking up tools and breaking down the wall. Murata hurriedly stands back, the impacts going through the floorboards and into his feet.

Although they're a bunch of rough fellows, Murata is now relying completely on them to rescue him. It's an emergency, so he can't be bothered that much now.

The crack widens, and a hole wide enough for an arm to reach through opens up in the fragile wall. A few people grab the hole with their hands, and slowly pull the wall open. The thick wall slides to a side, opening a space big enough for someone to pass through. It really is a door.

Before Murata can say anything, one person pushes through the crowd to walk up to him. Murata braces himself warily, but when he sees that person's appearance underneath the light from both sides, Murata instantly knows there's no need to be too cautious.



“Perfect, it’s you! Is Shibuya with you?”

The other person doesn’t answer, the force grabbing him exceptionally strong.

“Why, in this sort of place...”

References

1. [↑](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor_Nintoku#Nintoku.27s_tomb) Both names refer to the largest tomb in Japan.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor_Nintoku#Nintoku.27s_tomb)

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

It feels as though someone is calling me so I raise my head, but the problem is no one in the tent called my name. What's up with this? I keep having this ominous feeling. But I don't have that ability to sense these things, so it must be my imagination.

"...ri..."

Save—me—That is a cry for help, and at the same time a carefree voice that stops for long periods of time in between. It sounds pretty fun, actually.

"But that's not my imagination!"

That's Saralegui's voice. I kick aside the chair and get to my feet, curling up the entrance to the tent, and pull the Shou Shimaron king who almost overshot inside. Thankfully his pursuers didn't notice, but he sprawls onto the mat covered with sand and furs, throwing a tantrum at my rough actions.

Conrad and Wolfram understand the situation so they're not surprised, but Adalbert seems to be very taken aback. He probably didn't think other than me, the Shou Shimaron king would also make a big fuss even in the desert.

The thing in the corner of my vision suddenly disappears, turns out the living thing that looks like a caterpillar rolled off the bed. What's going on? Don't tell me it doesn't like showing its face in front of prestigious guests? What a shy fella.

"Sara... Why are you dressed so nice and cleanly?"

Maybe Saralegui accepted their services to bathe and change before joining the banquet, because his light and floaty hair is really clean, his skin really moist. He's wearing simple and clean clothes, there's even an ornament in his tied-up

hair, though it's a not-so-cute piece handmade from animal bones.

"Ah—Perfect, is Yuuri willing to hear me out? Those guys are just too much."

"Wait a sec, right now you should be in front of the equestrian tribe chief, announcing that the water supply in the desert belongs to Yelshi, right!? Could it be... they found out you're a fraud?"

"Really, Yuuri, do you think my acting skills are that bad?"

"You couldn't have... purposely made a mistake?"

"Am I that untrustworthy?"

He looks around him, then starts making a fuss because he doesn't get the answer he's looking for, before finally and reluctantly getting to the point.

"I wasn't found out, the people here believe I'm Yelshi from the bottom of their hearts. Besides, those guys who only know how to train in combat from day to night in the desert, would never be able to see through my acting skills."

"Then why did you have to escape here?"

"It's precisely because they think I'm the real thing, that's the big problem."

Saralegui shakes his head lightly, his tied-up hair falling down.

"They believe I'm Yelshi, without a shred of doubt, that's why I had no choice but to run away. Because those guys plan on holding His Majesty the Emperor hostage, and asking for a ransom from the Seisakoku government."

"Eh, isn't that an obvious act of treason?"

"That's exactly right."

While standing, my head starts to feel dizzy, as though my brain is starting to lack oxygen."

"Sara... You've finally been betrayed by your people..."

"Not me, y'know, Yuuri!? It should be Yelshi, right?"

Ah, that's true, I got a bit mixed up. It's Saralegui impersonating Yelshi who got betrayed by the equestrian people, citizens of Seisakoku, but this has nothing at all to do with the people of Shou Shimaron. The really unlucky one is the

Emperor of Seisakoku Yelshi, who nearly got held for ransom while he himself has no idea about this.

“Anyway we have to hide Sara first. If this goes on and Yelshi is assumed as kidnapped, then wouldn’t it be Yelshi’s substitute who’s held for ransom?”

“Well, I don’t want to be locked inside a tool cabinet.”

He really knows how to think for himself. I look around the room, but we are in a simple tent, after all, there’s nowhere at all to hide. The only place to hide should be underneath the bed, but that spot is already taken, two eyes sparkling through the pitch black darkness.

“Ah~~ Really! Adalbert, move the bed aside, quickly—”

“Your Majesty.”

Conrad’s tone sounds hesitant, the hand reaching out for my right shoulder wandering up and down helplessly. It’s rare for him to look so lost.

“I told you so many times, don’t call me Your Majesty.”

“Sorry. Yuuri, your eyes...”

“Eh? My eyes?”

And then Wolfram asks in a hoarse voice, “Can you see?” Hazel only raises her eyebrows, and finally Saralegui says in his usual tone,

“What, your eyes are okay now?”

“It’s true! I can see!”

I can see.

Wolfram’s blonde hair and emerald eyes, Hazel’s wrinkly hands and strong mouth, Adalbert’s buff muscles and butt-shaped chin, as well as Saralegui’s golden eyes. No matter how many times I blink, my vision doesn’t turn blurry, it’s not just shadows, it won’t disappear without a trace anymore.”

“I’m not dreaming, right? I can see... What are you doing, Conrad?”

“Your eyes are okay now? Is it true?”

Conrad kneels on the ground and pulls open my eyes to examine them, telling

me to move my eyes like an optician in the hospital. He shouldn't be joking around, but I still feel a bit put-out having to make these movements. Still, I'm really happy to see those brown eyes shining with silver light again. Although I never moved abroad, I still feel as though I've come home.

I can finally come back to reality. No matter what troubles I get into, I'm ecstatic just as long as I can come back. Regaining is a lot better than losing.

Alright, with this my body is finally back to normal, my palm and shoulder don't hurt anymore either. Right now I'm full of a 'Whether it rains water or spears, I'll do what must be done!' attitude.

"Thank goodness."

A voice like a parent's, and the way he puts his forehead on my shoulder, make me feel moved too.

"You're exaggerating, Conrad."

"I'm not exaggerating in the slightest. If your eyes never got better, I really won't know how to apologize..."

"It's not as though it was your fault."

The fit senior citizen Hazel laughs.

"Your Majesty's bodyguard is overprotective like a godfather."

She doesn't know the complicated way I was born, so I can't tell her "he even gave me my name".

"But what on earth is this...?"

Looking at Wolfram, who's staring at me non-stop, I really am beside myself with happiness. Really, you're still very cute! Since you always have such a valiant attitude, I assumed you matured quite a bit in the time we were apart, but to think you still have the beauty of an angel. Though it's true I can still sense you've definitely become manlier.

Right now I'm in such a good mood I just want to praise everyone and everything, I want so bad to praise everything these eyes can see. If I were to wax poetic now, the first line would be 'everything I see tonight is beautiful'.

“With this you can relax now, huh.”

Adalbert crosses his thick arms in front of his chest leisurely, lightly leaning on the table.

“Not only have you found your comrades, your stomach is full, and after your emotions relax, your brain doesn’t feel like it’s in danger anymore... Or I should say, deep down in your heart you believe the danger has passed, or the feeling that ‘I don’t have to do everything myself anymore’.”

“When you say ‘myself’...”

Before I can finish talking, Wolfram bumps me with his arm, and even says indignantly,

“You feel at ease just after a good meal, don’t tell me you were just malnourished? Yuuri... How could you be so mean?”

“No, how’s that possible!? How could a few days of malnourishment make my vision deteriorate so drastically?”

“What~~”

Of everyone on the scene only Saralegui speaks the most rudely.

“What a shame. This way Yuuri won’t ask me for help anymore.”

“You... Now isn’t the time to say these things, is it? You can barely take care of yourself... Oh, right, you had better hide right now, or make a run for it as fast as you can!”

“Even if I hide I’ll be found soon enough. On the other hand, I wonder how much Yelshi is worth in ransom? Yuuri, how much do you think Shin Makoku would pay for you?”

“Wolf, Conrad, Hazel! In any case we have to get the horses back, and get ready to leave the tent! You too, Sara!”

I feel there’s not much point in listening to Saralegui talk any further, so I grab his neck and walk outside. I came up with the childish plan so I have a responsibility, that’s why I must protect him properly.

We didn’t bring any large luggage anyway, so we just need horses. Hazel pulls

open the cloth at the entrance slightly, peeking at the situation outside.

“They’re searching in the opposite direction, so if we want to escape we had better do it now.”

“Do you need my help to move this disobedient brat king over there?”

I thought the person who spoke was Conrad, but it actually turns out to be Adalbert. If Sara were lifted by that muscleman, he would surely look like a little birdie on his shoulder. But there’s no such need, and having been treated as luggage Saralegui doesn’t seem too happy with it either.

“There’s no such need, he can walk on his own. Isn’t that right, Sara?”

“Is that so? Then go for it, you guys, I plan on staying here and living the easy life of a messiah for a while longer.”

Adalbert keeps sitting on the table and waves us goodbye. But the right hand he just raised is beaten down by someone, and his chest grabbed.

“Look at you, are you still a mazoku like this!?”

That person is Wolfram.

This image should look hilarious normally, right? After all there’s a huge difference in their body sizes, it looks like a cicada grabbing a large tree. But right now Adalbert is pressed down by Wolfram’s presence, so no one notices the difference in size at all.

“Right now there’s nothing we want more than another person who can fight, and you want to back out?”

“Hey, what are you doing? I gave up my identity as a mazoku long ago...”

“The king is in danger, and it’s one thing for you not to offer to help, but you actually want to keep living all carefree on this shinzoku land that never did you any good!?”

“Hey hey hey, it’s nothing to do with me.”

“Wolf, don’t be like that, we can’t force him.”

I plan on stopping Wolfram, but Conrad stands in front of me, and my mind suddenly says ‘crap’. Because in a manner of speaking, the relationship between

these two is worse than anyone else.

“Adalbert.”

Conrad shouldn't go to the extent of hitting people, but I'm still really worried he'll say anything harsh. To my surprise, Lord Weller just says one line in all seriousness,

“We need you.”

“...Alright.”

The man who was just yelling about how he gave up his identity as a mazoku falls silent for a while, then raises his head and says determinedly,

“Alright.”

The same answer.

The tent is completely empty, the soldiers chasing the mazokus all moving out, so the equestrian tribe village falls quiet again. Just then, the caterpillar hiding under the bed finally crawls out.

He doesn't care about the sand on his body, rolling around left and right until he eventually loosens up his bonds, and his arms are finally freed. Nigel Weiss Maxine sighs as he shakes his beard. Treated as the messiah's accessory, although the position seems extravagant, the truth is the life of a mermaid is far from easy.

But this is the wish of his beloved father.

Maxine's blushing expression is extremely cute, but it can't be seen through his beard.

This is how Adalbert asked Maxine, “Rather than those vulgar limbs, you're better suited looking like a mermaid.” In truth, what he actually said was, “So how, now you're utterly helpless. You're better suited looking like this.” Maxine's strongest suit is misunderstanding others.

But his suffering is worth it, because his appearance is too seductive, so the

equestrian people really admire him. But there's an unforgivable idiot, who looked at him and said he was a caterpillar.

Maxine is angry. Damn, that cocky Maou brat, how dare he keep staring at me. And once you have anything to do with that brat, it's never anything good. When His Majesty Saralegui barged in, he nearly thought he would faint from the shock.

He finally managed to start over again in the second springtime of his life as a mermaid, but if that 'Majesty found him then it'd be all over. He would definitely be taken back to Shou Shimaron, and keep suffering from that inhumane treatment, stomped under others' feet.

This is all the fault of that Maou brat who brought His Majesty Saralegui. The next time he sees the brat, he'll make him into mermaid rolls, and then throw him into a lake of stinky moss.

But Father... Maxine hurriedly covers his mouth. Crap, he can only call him Father when they're alone together... But Adalbert left him here alone, what on earth happened? It's probably because Adalbert has to handle his private matters, and doesn't want to put Maxine in danger. But you're not supposed to think like that with family, plus Adalbert obviously knows that Maxine won't die no matter what.

Of course, although he had quickly darted under the bed and avoided Saralegui's gaze, now he doesn't know what to do next.

Adalbert said he already fed the luggage over there just now, but the truth is the equestrian people handled Maxine's meals, it's just that they forget sometimes. But he suspects that those equestrian people in charge of feeding him forget to give him food on purpose, just like today, when they only brought a bowl of soup, without bread or a main dish. And when those equestrian people bring food to his mouth with a spoon, they always wear an expression of disgust.

That's envy, it must be envy towards the mermaid. Maxine firmly believes that's the reason, but the true reason is probably the food scraps on his beard.

But since he's the messiah's accessory, how should he live without the main host?

Mn, he should start by understanding the enemy.

It's a rare chance for Maxine to stretch his limbs, the bones in his arms and legs making disgusting noises, and then he stands up with a 'hey!'. First he must investigate this village thoroughly; the stakeout is so he can plan the actions he must take for his life from today onwards. Since he was carried here as a mermaid, he hasn't taken even one step out of this tent to this day.

Just like the old grandma just now, he peeks out of the entrance, and confirms that there's no one outside.

And then he tiptoes out of the tent, to avoid being seen, crossing past the densely-packed tents. Thankfully the ground here is hard with some sand, so as long as he steps lightly, his footsteps are barely audible.

This green tent has not only sounds of conversation, but also an indescribable aroma. Although Adalbert's cooking is wonderful, this is a completely different smell. It's cooking that doesn't add anything to the ingredients, bringing out the original taste directly. Although it's just simple roasted potatoes, Maxine is hungry.

The two things he can't deal with most are an empty stomach and women.

Maxine hesitates, and finally decides to pull open the entrance. To fill his stomach, he has no other choice.

"Oh dear!"

There are about ten people sitting around a campfire, all their gazes moving to Maxine. Twenty eyes on him at once shocks him into putting down the entrance cloth.

T-this is!

They are all women inside, young and old women sitting around the campfire and roasting potatoes as they chat. And they're all shinzoku, so to him they all look identical. Nigel Weiss Maxine is panicking.

Is this the legendary women's tent?

His tied-up hair shakes non-stop. By the way, since he has long hair, his hair style is cropped upwards.

No way, he can't stay near here. He feels... it's very likely he will lose his life.

Once you get involved with women you will definitely lose your life, that is the lesson young Maxine learned with his own body. And their eyebrows are three times thicker than a man's.

Following his lesson, he quietly leaves the tent with the overwhelming aroma. Although his heart is reluctant to leave the roast potatoes, but no matter what he doesn't want to barge into that mound of women.

Tragedy strikes him anyway. While making a petite noise, a petite body rushes at him, catching him through the thick canvas.

"Gah--!"

"Ponytail!"

"Ponytail!"

Completely disregarding the fact that Maxine screams out loud from the impact to his ribs, the two petite young girls hug him tightly with every last ounce of strength they have. That floaty almost-white blond hair, those slender limbs, those golden eyes, and those identical faces, it looks like they're twins. These are all classic shinzoku traits, but that's not the main point—these two look very familiar, extremely familiar.

But logically speaking, on a land so far away from home, there's no way he would bump into someone he knew. Maxine starts denying, but the two girls won't let him go.

"Ponytail, do what?"

"Ponytail, cropped hairstyle?"

They use their unique accent to ask, while attacking his stomach and legs. This is their way of getting their feelings across.

"J-Jason, Freddy... Mm-guh!"

"Ponytail--!"

Their favorite Ponytail (nickname) still remembers them, the girls delightedly use their fists to knock those ribs that are already hurting like hell. Basically he

hadn't gotten any plumper, so he can hear the sound of them hitting his bones directly.

That's right, the more he remembers it the more he feels they're painful memories. It was the same back then.

Back then Maxine had bought the girls with money, he planned to use the twin girls as powerful houjutsu users. At first he should have been their owner, but they ignore him when he sends them on errands, and if he makes them go to bed early they will stuff thistles into his pillow, and if he asked them to practice their houjutsu they will use him as their target.

But since they're important firepower, Maxine took very good care of them. Sometimes he would make scarfs for them, sometimes he would make aprons. When he did everything he could to finally put them on good terms with each other, the Maou suddenly came visiting, and even took the girls he worked so hard into raising away.

"Damn, it's all that Maou brat's fault!"

The girls stop suddenly, two pairs of golden eyes staring at the bearded man in front of them.

"The Maou is here?"

"Ponytail, Yuuri came?"

"Who cares if he's Yuuri or Furi, in any case that Maou I hate deep in my bones was just here in this village."

Jason and Freddy suddenly cry out in shock. Crap, if this goes on they will only cause a ruckus, and the soldiers on guard will also gather here, so Maxine hurriedly stops them.

"Wait a sec! Wait a sec wait a sec! On the other hand, how did you guys end up in this sort of place?"

"Caught here."

"Right, caught here. Maxine, know the detention facilities?"

"Don't know, don't know."

“By the equestrian people.”

Although it’s really hard to understand, but based on his super translation skills, it should be “we were caught and brought here by the equestrian people when we were at the detention facility”. It’s extremely common for them to use shinzoku with offensive houjutsu as firepower, and if the targets are kids, it’d be even easier.

“But the food here isn’t bad.”

“That’s right, very delicious. All thanks to the messiah and mermaid.”

Well of course, Adalbert has been commanding the kitchen these past few days. But Ponytail doesn’t know whether he should confess that he’s the mermaid.

The girls ignore him as he hesitates, having a discussion of their own then saying to Maxine together,

“Know where Yuuri is?”

“What? How would I know something like that.”

“Ponytail, take us there.”

“Why are you asking me!?”

The twins look at him tearfully, lacing their fingers in front of their chests,

“Because Ponytail is really friendly, the adults here aren’t gentle at all. As expected, Ponytail is still gentler.”

“Because Ponytail, is just like Papa.”

Just like Papa? Like Papa? Like Papa?

To think that they would reunite in a foreign country, and then he’d have to face something like this before they even exchanged greetings? Maxine’s head starts hurting, but is that because of the girls’ overenthusiastic show of feelings? Or is it simply hunger? No one knows, but thankfully Jason pulls something out of her pocket, making his dizziness disappear in a flash.

“Ponytail, this is for you!”

“As long as you take us, it’s yours.”

“Mgh...”

Jason and Freddy maintain the same position, keeping the momentum to land more hits by repeating the same words.

“Because Ponytail, is just like Papa.”

Having been bought over by roasted potatoes despite already being an adult, Nigel Weiss Maxine mumbles to himself:

To my dearest Father, although this is rather sudden, you have granddaughters now.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Right now I can't complain that galloping on the horse will knock my butt around.

Because "it's best to prepare a spare horse", I'm currently riding a horse on my own.

Saralegui is riding with Adalbert, to be more precise, I should say he's tied onto Adalbert's back. I've never seen such a depressed-looking piece of cargo. Seriously, I can't believe that there are men in this world who don't envy muscles.

To be honest, I'm really extremely pleased with myself right now. Although the danger isn't over yet, and I'm still in a pinch, but having my vision back makes me feel as though there's nothing I can't do, as though there's nothing in the world beyond my means.

I can ride a horse on my own, get away from the equestrian people who plan to kidnap the Seisakoku emperor for a ransom, solve the problem of the oasis' water source, save Jason and Freddy, and in accordance with their wishes, help Venera—in other words Hazel, reach the royal tombs, make sure the Box is safe and then return to Shin Makoku.

After that I'll fulfill the promise I made my brother and return to Earth, return home.

The maseki in front of my chest heats up again after so long, too, so I believe everything will go smoothly.

"Yuuri."

Still a little nervous being on horseback, I glance to my side, and see Conrad

riding up to me. Although we're on the run, his expression is very calm, and he's smiling at goodness-knows-what.

"You're riding well so high up, huh."

"Are you trying to say 'riding on a high'? Please spare me the cold jokes!"^[1]

"I'm not."

It seems it's been a long time since I saw Conrad's gentle smile. How strange, not long ago we saw each other every day.

"While you were away, I practiced properly."

"Is that so? Looks like you had a good teacher."

I can't say he's lying, either.

"I feel as though just being able to see makes my riding skills fifty percent better."

"Yuuri, about that..."

His tone sounds like he's going to say something important, so I lean my body forward in order to hear him better, and at the same time I apply pressure with my thighs to make sure I don't fall off.

"What is it?"

"Your soul..."

I never hear the rest of it, because Adalbert, in charge of the rear, issues a warning in a voice that can be heard clearly even during a game,

"The pursuers are here!"

"So soon!?"

"Because they're equestrian people, as long as they go all out on their horses, they're extremely fast."

Wolfram catches up to us, the corners of his lips curling up. Under these circumstances, all he can do is smile strangely. Despite his angelic looks, he can also say something so mature. To think he can show a smile completely unlike his two brothers, saying such brave words.

Watching him grow up so quickly recently, I can't help but feel panicked. If I keep assuming he's on the same level as me, one day I will surely be left behind in the dust.

I maintain my balance as I look behind me—as expected they're right, although it's only the size of a one yen coin, I can still see the speeding horses kicking up a cloud of dust in the distance.

With this it's not too good to continue having Adalbert holding up the rear, once they take out weapons like crossbows, he'll soon have to strike out. Saralegui, tied on his back, must now be experiencing a terror unlike any other before.

“Adalbert! Come over to the front!”

“Understood. I really don't want to, but at the same time I don't want anyone wetting themselves on my back.”

“I already used the toilet before we set off.”

Looks like he's not that terrified after all.

Rushing over to the front, Hazel's steed raises its front legs majestically. Hazel Graves steers the brown mare to stand on its hind legs with her brilliant riding skills.

“BOYS!”

“What's the matter!?”

“We have a situation in front!”

I focus my gaze and see a building about as tall as a hill in the distance. At first I thought it was a pyramid, but it's not a simple pyramid shape, more like a slightly crooked mound, but its height and width are both several times that of Japanese ancient tombs. Maybe it's the king's or emperor's family tombs, otherwise it's seriously too huge to live in.

But the problem right now isn't the tomb itself.

The danger isn't the historical building, but the new power that had been long since waiting in place ahead of us. A large group of people stand in a horizontal line, probably not more than two hundred people in total, and they're advancing

onto us.

From this distance I can see the shadows of spears and axes on their backs, so I can deduce they're soldiers. But they're different from equestrian people hot on our tails, because there aren't a lot of soldiers on horseback, most of them are foot soldiers. Although we can't be sure if they're friends or foes yet, or even completely unrelated to us, just a group we happened to stumble across, but we can't still be sure of their true identities—because their limbs are different from normal people.

“Could it be... the revived group...”

Right now isn't the time to call them such a cute name. Those guys are all dead people, they're the accursed undead that attacked us back before we entered the underground tunnel.

We have no choice but stop the horses, and our pursuers may also have realized that their messiah is with us. In that case, if things get bad all we can do is ask Adalbert for help...

“Your Majesty, maybe this is just me.”

Hazel asks in a careful tone unlike her, as though there's something she finds hard to say.

“That cold case ahead of us, I keep feeling as though I've seen it before.”

“What cold case...”

Only after she says that, do I see 'that' opposite us, and start disbelieving my own eyes. I have indeed seen it, my vision capturing the image and sending it to my brain, which then quickly analyses the image. But I can't believe that the answer I get is correct, so I start wondering if my eyes that just recovered are problematic.

I refuse to believe that what my eyes see is an illusion.

Wolfram's low murmur to himself gives me a confirmatory answer.

“Gurrier...”

It can't be, right?

“It can’t be.”

How could it be.

Gurrier Josak is obviously there... I don’t want to keep remembering, grabbing my throat with my left hand, my fingers grappling my neck tightly.

“Josak is still alive.”

If that’s true, even if there’s a stone stuck there, I still want to squeeze a sound out of my painful throat. I don’t know whether the words I hear next are Conrad’s, or my own.

“If it really is him, then that before was an illusion, and, my, hypothesis...”

“No, it’s exactly as Your Majesty said.”

Right now, Lord Weller seems absolutely polite and humble.

“It can’t be!”

Although his tone sounds very heartless, but he probably noticed long ago.

The man that looks like Josak rides a red horse in the middle of the group. He’s wearing different things from when we were separated, his body wrapped in a grey cloak that’s easily mixed up with the sand, something the equestrian people commonly wear. He’s not wearing the hood, so his orange hair flies in the wind, and the distance is too far for us to see his eyes clearly.

Is it the blue I’m familiar with? Or a scarier color? Or some other emotionless color?

In front of the man’s horse, there’s something that looks like a mountain of rags. Having noticed our gazes in him, he carelessly tosses the item over. The black object lands in the sand with a thump.

The object wrapped in rags slumps on the soft sand.

It has limbs, and the back of that black-haired head is facing us.

There’s also something that seems like glass on his finger, sparkling in the sunlight. Although his shoulders twitch a little, they stop immediately. That person is alive, at the very least he’s still alive now.

His head moves slowly, the black hair rubbing against the ground, it seems like

he wants to raise his face, but he can't so it's buried back into the sand. He doesn't groan, and I can't hear any breathing sounds.

But I know who he is. All from a glance of his forehead, and those eyes with the same color as mine, I know.

"...Murata?"

He doesn't hear me.

"W-why... Josak..."

My body reacts one step faster than my mind. I can't control myself at all.

"Hold on a second!"

"How do you expect me to wait! Murata—"

Conrad holds me back by putting his hands under my armpits, preventing me from jumping off the horse.

"I will definitely save him, so please hold on a second."

"How will you save him!?"

"No matter what methods I use, I will definitely save him."

"But!"

Saralegui walks over to where we're arguing, his steps unsteady, it was probably Adalbert who let him down. His face and neck look even fairer under the desert sun, and then he asks something completely meaningless in a happy tone.

"Yuuri, do you remember the contents of the deal?"

"Ah!? At a time like this, what are you talking about! It's obvious now isn't the time to discuss that!"

"Listen!"

The powerful order makes me shut up.

"I said before I wanted a certain person's life, right? Looks like it's exactly as I expected. I've decided."

"I already said it's not the time to discuss that."

“But not your life, mine. You have to let me leave this country safely.”

“Eh, why...”

Saralegui’s golden eyes, sparkle like a cat forced into a corner. But even though he’s been forced into a corner, there isn’t a hint of despair in his eyes. The corners of his lips even lift into a fearless smile, my first time seeing such a smile on him.

“Because the situation has changed.”

His gaze goes over Josak, looking at someone in the back. A slender body wrapped in a hooded cloak rides a white horse in the flying yellow sand, that appearance alone a world’s difference from the surrounding soldiers. Suddenly, my pinky starts heating up again, the pale pink ring tightening harder and harder, but not to the point of pain.

“Why?”

A strong gust of wind blows up the hood hiding that face.

The same hair, the same face, the same figure.

“Yelshi...”

The young Emperor of Seisakoku, Yelshi, smiles with the same golden eyes as his older brother.



1. [↑](#) The joke was probably already lost in Chinese, but it's something to do with 'riding well/good' and 'everything will be alright'.

Short story - Falling in love

Falling in Love

There's only one guest tonight.

That is indeed what the lady owner of the inn said. That's unsurprising, too, because although the location is by the roadside, no matter what it's still isolated deep in the mountains, so there can't be too many travelers passing by. The only people who would pass this area should probably be hunters, but the problem is hunting season is over too.

Add to that the fact that the weather has been rather bad since three days ago, and it keeps raining on and off too. I'm probably the only strange person who would come to this backwater place at such a gloomy time.

As for why I came to this sort of place, there's no special reason.

My life is one of endless traveling. Although that sounds cool, what it really means is I wander around aimlessly.

I only walked all the way here back then because I thought I could cross this mountain, but instead the road stopped halfway. Still I'm in no hurry, and I don't have any real destination, much less do I have any need to pull apart the branches and force my horse forward.

But it's still quite the miracle to find an inn in this sort of place, I thought that in an isolated mountain area like this, there wouldn't even be a hut for me to take shelter in. That's why, even though this inn has worse facilities than a normal household, my feet sticking out of the simple bed, I still have no complaints.

Even if I'm delegated to the little room beside the kitchen, I'm fine with it.

According to what the middle-aged lady owner said, this is the only room that doesn't have a leak, and the furniture in here are the only dry and clean ones. The words just now she added nonchalantly.

“There’s only one guest tonight.”

The lady owner takes me to a room that looks like the dining area, and after bringing out some food that makes me feel like suggesting, “Lend me your kitchen! Rather than eating something like this I’d rather cook for myself!”, she returns to her room on the second floor.

And then I hear the sound of a sturdy lock. Whatever, if she didn’t have that level of self-preservation, there’s no way she would be able to do business here, especially considering she’s just one woman.

I eat the tasteless, ration-like dinner, and drink the wine that’s pale in both color and flavor.

I have lived a long life as a soldier, so I’m long since used to food like this, but when I see the edible vegetables in the pantry with its doors open, I still feel a little empty inside.

Thinking, “Since you have these things, you could be able to make more decent food, right?”

But maybe it’s just I checked in at the wrong time. Because by now the sun has long since set, normal people would have retired to bed ages ago.

So I obediently return to my small room, drinking a bottle of wine I brought in on my own, planning to put myself to sleep earlier. I’m not in the mood to chat with what looks like a hard-headed human woman anyway.

But this wine is seriously hard to swallow, there’s no grape taste at all. Cursing how wine can be this tasteless, I lie on the bed listlessly, listening to the sound of the rain on the window. Just then, that guy arrives, knocking over pots and pans non-stop.

Listening to the loud sounds from across the thin walls, I even thought that the lady owner’s husband or lover is trying to sneak in. But next door is the kitchen, would her husband or lover need to enter through the kitchen?

So I think it must be a thief or a hungry animal. This deep in the mountains, it wouldn’t be surprising even if wild boars or bears found their way in. Or it could be a stupid lost thief, forced by hunger, throwing caution to the winds and running in here.

Anyway, if it dares to step into this room, be it a human or animal, I'm going to slash it with my sword. That tragic dinner and water-like wine tonight has already put my mood at rock bottom.

But this intruder sure is polite, even starting to pick up the overturned pots and pans, moving carefully to make sure the people in the house don't notice, only making slight noises.

Hey hey hey, you already raised such a ruckus on the way in, there's no reason to start cleaning up now, right?

The reason why the lady owner on the second floor didn't come down, is probably not because she's so dead asleep she can't hear the noises, but for self-preservation. After all, showing her face carelessly could endanger her life. Perhaps she assumes the thief will leave after deducing there's not much to take. For all I know she may have experienced such things many times before.

The intruder is completely unaware of all this, still trying to hide its tracks. What kind of idiot is this, and where from? Is it human? A monkey or ape that has been trained strictly, and has really good manners?

Grumpy over the tasteless wine, I grab my sword and walk out of the room. It's not like I want to protect the lady owner, nor do I want to reduce the damage to the inn, I just want to see what that fella looks like.

I have to admit, honestly, I'm a little drunk.

It's just that I didn't think that in this place when I haven't even decided my destination, deep in the mountains where the rain won't stop either, I would actually bump into a familiar face.

And we haven't met just once or twice either, but so many times you could call it twisted fate.

There's no way I would mistake Nigel Weiss Will-Never-Die Maxine. After all, this guy's 'undying legend' started with me.

"Maxine, what the hell are you doing?"

His expression looks like his soul flew out of his mouth in an instant, finally dispersing my bad mood over the horrible weather these past few days and

making me laugh.

Maxine, with that Shou Shimaron soldier's special stupid hairdo and strange beard, is sprawled on the floor, picking up the pots and pans that have scattered everyone. This drenching wet hair is like a powerless squirrel's tail, his untrimmed stubble like a farm in early spring.

Although he's a thirty-year-old man dressed strangely, but the reason he barged in here is just like the brats running around on the streets. Still, all he can say is the truth.

"I'm hungry."

Trespassing into an inn just because you're hungry? Please, you're not young anymore, and you're the soldier of a large country, looting and plundering in a place outside of the battlefield, that's just too much. If you want to eat then you have to pay for it, take your money to a restaurant, duh. Sacking a civilian residence, you think you're a black bear that forgot to hibernate!?

But I'm not Maxine's father, neither am I his superior officer, so I have no responsibility to train him into a good soldier. All I do is hold my stomach and laugh my head off, then throw a carrot from the pantry to him, telling him into eat. What surprises me is that the guy actually picks up and starts munching away, I've decided to call him Little Pony Boy from now on.

Just as Maxine is munching away at the carrot, the cheerful atmosphere quickly disappears.

This is not my first time seeing this sight, this is exceedingly normal on the battlefield. No, even the raw vegetables and not-yet-rotten rations are considered good. If it were the harsh frontlines, even the worms or roots in the ground would be dug up and eaten. I never heard what it's like on the enemy side, but it shouldn't be that different.

But this isn't the battlefield neither is it a junkyard, instead it's a rainy day in the quiet mountains, plus there's food as well as pots here.

"Just how hungry are you?"

No matter close you are, you might not necessarily know someone else's eating preferences. For all I know this guy really likes eating raw vegetables, or

maybe he believes carrots are for eating raw.

But I still take back the red vegetable in Maxine's hands, and find a kitchen knife from the kitchen cabinet.

I said it before, I'm a little drunk.

Everyone has some strange behavior after they get drunk.

Like cleaning up the storage room they rarely use, or writing a letter to someone they decided not to meet for the rest of their lives, these are things they would never do if they were sober. The scariest thing is that before they get sober, they will believe it's an excellent thing to do.

I know one man who would start knitting things when drunk, and was accepted as a disciple by his childhood friend the next morning, so from then on he had no choice but to respectfully call her 'Master'. The relationship between the two seemed to have been decided then.

Drunk on one bottle of pale wine, I unsurprisingly do something unimaginable.

I start cooking in the inn's kitchen, and for Maxine no less. But also for myself, since all that laughing just made me hungrier.

Being so hungry he wasn't against breaking and entering into an inn, the way Maxine eats is quite terrifying, even the hungry children I tend to see during wartime are no match for him. He can't even bother with the dining table, directly biting the biscuit in place of bread on the kitchen's messy cooking counter, his hands holding the bowl of soup as he drinks, as though he doesn't even have the time to grab a spoon.

I stir the pot of stewed vegetables, taken aback by his terrifying appetite.

What's up with these Shou Shimaron soldiers? Don't they have army rations?

Having finally filled his stomach, Maxine raises his head from the plate. Maybe he choked on the soup, because he coughs with tears in his eyes. It's only when he eventually stops coughing that he murmurs,

"So delicious."

“Well then, th...”

Whoa whoa, that was close, I almost thanked him.

“Especially this stewed rabbit.”

From tomorrow onwards let’s call him Little Pony Boy.

But at least he doesn’t only eat raw carrots.

Maxine harrumphs with his nose, confirming the smell of leftovers in the pot. Maybe it’s just me, but his limp squirrel tail seems to have recovered its spirits too.

“In our hometown village, there’s a woman who can cook really well. The way you stew carrots is exactly the same.”

And I was wondering what this guy wanted to say.

So I pull out a chair, take my plate and sit opposite the Shou Shimaron man. I’m not hungry anymore, the disgusting pale wine’s aftertaste lingering on the tip of my tongue.

“Don’t talk about such scary things with me, I’ve never been to your hometown.”

“And I never said your food tastes the same.”

“Nonsense. Goodness~~ I’m feeling a little chilly.”

“The meat is really delicious too. Only today... did I find out that your cooking is so good.”

“But I don’t know what meat that is, though.”

The truth is I do know. Although it was processed until the original look was completely lost so it could be preserved, it’s still pretty decent venison. There should be hunters in charge of hunting deer and rabbits nearby, those are all prey you don’t have to worry will fight back.

As I stab the meat in the plate, I glance at the pantry – looking for a bottle of wine.

Even if it’s pale and disgusting, it’s still wine. That’s how people drink too much, and then before they know it they’re drunk.

Maxine doesn't care what I think at all, walking to the pot to refill his third bowl of soup. Thank goodness, now I don't have to see the food scraps on his beard.

"Although the way you roast it is different, but the meat you use is the same as that woman."

"Is that so?"

"She said it's high quality beef."

You've been conned.

"Her cooking is really the best, she can make the meat all soft and tasty and wonderful. That woman's secret is using special spices, no one in the village can learn it from her."

"I see."

"Although she doesn't look that good, but her culinary skills are really incomparable. She always says one day she will save up the money to start her own shop."

"That happens a lot."

Looking at the last bottle of wine, my attention can't help but be drawn to it. Then Maxine suddenly springs a random line, "...At first I planned to marry her."

"Oopph!"

This time I'm the one who chokes, as expected it sucks to have soup in your windpipe.

But that guy is already over thirty years old, and he's an elite soldier who can lead a team, so it's not too surprising if he had one or two fiancées... But can a man who breaks into an inn in his hunger really be called elite?

Maxine doesn't mind me and my thoughts going all over the place, continuing his narration of his past. And those are all stories he would never speak of if he wasn't drunk, I think he's drunk on carrots.

"At first I planned to make a big splash on my first campaign, and then bring home medals and reward money. I promised to use that money for her shop. My

family has been soldiers for generations, I thought it'd a great thing to have a wife with a special skill."

"Your first campaign? When was that? How old were you then?"

If I remember correctly, the first time I saw him this guy was about fourteen or fifteen. Just as I mentioned, the one who started his 'undying legend' is me, and the place we fought wasn't on Shou Shimaron land. That was a rash loss by a foolish commander leading a bunch of rookie soldiers.

"Fourteen."

"As I thought."

"She was four years older than me, she just turned eighteen."

I keep getting the feeling that... as expected, you were conned.

He was talking about marriage at fourteen years old, how do humans mature so young? Fourteen-year-old mazokus are nothing more than kids, they can't even be called manpower on the battlefield, neither could they be allowed to hold a sword. Forget the battlefield, they could only do basic training even at the soldier academy.

"Marriage, huh~~ But taking such a happy promise with you onto the battlefield, doesn't sound very lucky. The more you boast about it to your comrades, the more likely something unfortunate might happen to you. Just like me, I got engaged before going onto the battlefield, and as a result I nearly lost my life, it's true. In that case, why are you fine?"

He lowers his shoulders dejectedly, his hands holding the bowl and his head lowered. His hair that looked like a ponytail before, goes back to looking like a depressed squirrel.

"I never told anyone about it."

"Hah? Then that was very modest of you, how unlike you."

"It's not that. Although her cooking skills were excellent... But not only wasn't she pretty, her eyebrows are three times thicker than a man's."

"Three times..."

“And her voice is so deep it’s not at all like a woman’s, plus she’s one head taller than me.”

I feel as though he was conned really badly.

“S-so how did it end? I don’t know whether you got any reward money, but anyway you made it back alive, and happily married her, right?”

“By the time I got back to the village, she had long since been married.”

“What!?”

Nigel Weiss Maxine’s undying legend began then.

“I only found out afterward, that even if she’s not pretty, has a deep voice and is very tall, she’s still as popular with the men as the other women. The moment they eat her food, anyone will become her slave, and will obsess over her... even if her eyebrows are three times thicker.”

“Okay...”

I don’t dare to suggest that maybe that person isn’t a woman, so I just put the wine bottle I took out against the lamp light.

So there is that sort of thing. No matter what kind of woman the other party is, there would be someone who falls irreversibly in love with her; even if a woman is so beautiful it’s like she’s not from this world, there are still times she can’t find love; even if it’s a woman whose looks have nothing to do with ‘beauty’, there will still be people who find her cute; even if it’s a perfect woman with no flaws, after being with her for some time they might discover that their personalities do not go along.

Before you fall in love, you won’t know why you love the other person. Even if you’re faced with a woman everyone praises, you might not necessarily be moved by the part of her everyone praises. Although in the end you will accept everything about her, and love her everything, that first wavering of the heart will be different for everybody.

It could be the eyes, it could be the voice, it could even be the lips, or that person’s graceful actions in that moment.

But for me, it’s none of that.

Putting down the transparent wine bottle, I pull out the crumbling, soft cork. There's some sediment at the bottom of the bottle, I pray with all of my heart that the wine won't be too tasteless this time.

"Cooking skills can indeed capture a person's heart."

"What, did you use your skills to make a woman head over heels in love with you too?"

Maybe he wants to use eating as a way to remove the sadness in his heart, because Maxine starts chomping down again. If someone were to walk in on this scene, seeing two old men eating opposite each other, they would definitely find it extremely disgusting.

After all it's midnight, and on the kitchen counter too.

"Wrong, I was the one who fell in love with her."

There are a million ways for a couple to meet, such as childhood friends, or an arrangement by their parents, but that's not how I met her, because we didn't know each other's families. Until now, those guys still think we met on a tour of the capital or a ball.

That's not the truth.

We weren't wearing clothes beautiful enough to join the queen's balls, neither were we at a place where blue-blooded aristocrats would meet.

I was wearing slightly a dirty uniform, she was wearing childish cotton pajamas, and she even tucked in her top like a child afraid of getting her stomach cold. I don't know whether other women like to wear such unsexy pajamas, but she dressed like that even though she's obviously an adult.

I was also just a young soldier, wearing my thin army uniform, without a single rank badge on my body. As a not-too-serious rookie I had slipped out from the nearly non-stop morning-to-night practical training.

Because I was hungry.

"Just like you right now, I snuck into the nearby castle. But I didn't knock over any pots and pans."

"Don't you have food in the army?"

“You should know what military training is like, right? There’s no fear because there aren’t any enemies, so they use other methods to pressure the soldiers, otherwise there won’t be any meaning to the training. Things like the geography, the weather, hunger, anyway the army doesn’t care if it goes up to ten days, there won’t be any supplies given during the training period. Although it’s not to the point of eating poisonous mushrooms, snakes and frogs are expected sources of food. Still, if you pretend they’re chicken, they still taste pretty decent.”

But it’s not that easy for us to catch that many reptiles and amphibians either, so the young soldiers are always hungry, and can’t even fall asleep that easily when it’s time to call it a day. Therefore I left that group of starving young men with grumbling stomachs, and went into the forest at night searching for food. Technically this is a serious offense, and would warrant a heavy punishment, but even if my superior officer found out about it, he wouldn’t dare to make me accountable because I’m a noble.

Anyway I was being cheeky, and set my target on somewhere I can return to the troop back in time from. I found some light in a corner of a huge shadow, so I ducked past many guards and slipped in from the window, but I never expected that to be the kitchen of the Wincott castle.

The Wincott soldiers were always famous for their bravery and stubborn strength, even those without *maryoku* were excellent in their combat skills, especially when it comes to their fists and feet, no one else can hope to compare. That’s why the guards protecting the castle should all have been brave and powerful experts.

Thinking back now, the fact that I had managed to avoid surveillance and break into the kitchen back then, is probably nothing short of a miracle. Maybe God had a sudden interest that day, to allow me to meet her.

Suzanna Julia was in there—the kitchen of the Wincott castle.

“Who’s there?”

Maybe she had smelled some strange scent, Julia poked her body part from the kitchen counter to ask.

And she even turned her body towards me, her face turned in my direction

too, I couldn't tell at all that there was anything wrong with her vision. Especially since she wasn't at all uneasy or surprised, asking me once more calmly,

"I don't know, who are you?"

"Sorry, I'm not some suspicious character..."

I really was an idiot, one foot on the windowsill, and even meeting a young girl in the middle of the night, how could that not be suspicious. Suddenly remembering what I'm doing, I decided to give up on explaining, it'd only get worse. At times like this, it's best to be honest.

Tell her I snuck in for food.

"The truth is, I'm hungry..."

"Me too!"

Julia suddenly said happily, walking around the kitchen counter over to me.

"But whenever I say I want to eat supper, the others will nag me, saying things like eating so late at night isn't something girls should do. My little brother can eat anything any time, hmph. But my little brother is still young, so he falls immediately asleep once he's finished eating."

"Um..."

"So I can't eat like my little brother, and adults can't sleep immediately after eating. Besides I have to practice majutsu too, if I were to oversleep and miss my martial arts training that'd be bad. Because the martial arts teacher keeps trying everything to kick me out of classes... Oh dear, you're..."

She talked up a river, and touched my clothes brazenly. As though to confirm something, her palm moves from my collar to my shoulder, and then towards my chest. I felt like she was a really brazen woman, but her aura made me unable to retort anything.



“Not from here.”

“I’m a soldier, I really am a Shin Makoku soldier.”

She murmured, “Good point, that’s right,” and removed her hand from my chest. After she helped me fix my collar that had been messed up by the tree branches, she reaches out her hand and puts it on my stomach,

“And you’re hungry, too.”

That was my first time looking at her face up close.

Suzanna Julia was a praise-worthy woman. Everyone praised the young lady of the von Wincott family, saying she was beautiful and kind.

Even though I didn’t know who she was, I still thought she was perfect, flawless. Her sky blue eyes were very beautiful, and her lips, smiling a little mischievously, were also very cute.

It’s just that for a woman her age, she lacked a little grace, you could even say she was slightly rough, but all that I only found out after I knew her for a long time.

But back then I hadn’t fallen in love.

We were just hungry young people, the same kind who would sneak into the kitchen for supper. So why not follow our wishes, and complete our objectives?

That night, we used all the ingredients in the kitchen, and then ate it all. The hungry soldier and the princess with the empty stomach sat opposite each other beside the not-too-pretty large kitchen counter, filling our stomachs before sunbreak and then went our separate ways.

No one noticed me and I successfully left the castle, returning to the army. It was only when we moved out during the daytime that I realized not only did I not shake her hand, I didn’t even ask for her name.

“And after that you never met that woman again?”

Maxine asks, soup dribbling down his beard, but this time he uses a spoon. Maybe it’s because he’s not that hungry anymore, so he’s finally in the mood to

use cutlery.

“How can that be, she’s my fiancée after all.”

“What, how did she turn from a regular encounter to your fiancée?”

“Because she remembered my cooking.”

After that I snuck into the Wincott castle often, it was only on the second day I found out her name was Suzanna Julia. I also stated my identity to her, but even if she knew my identity, she only let me into the kitchen. I mean, only there did we have anything to do.

“Forget the bedroom, I never even went to the living room and the gardens. We only met in the kitchens deep in the night, chatting as we feasted.”

Upon hearing that I wasn’t invited to her bedroom, Maxine suddenly has an expression of triumph. I don’t care what you think, you carrot drunkard. You’re a human who matured early and was conned by a woman at fourteen years old, unlike us, content with what we had.

The rookie soldier training finally over, I visited every corner of the country as an officer in training, while at the same time learning how to cook in the barracks. My interest turned to recreating the food I was served at different places, and the local desserts.

“And thanks to that, our kitchen dates became even more fulfilling...”

“No matter how, no matter how I hear it, I still don’t think you’ll get into a boy-girl relationship with that woman!”

Holding the soup spoon in his right hand, Maxine yells out loudly. Even though you’re supposed to become calmer after filling your stomach, to think this guy throws tantrums even after eating, he’s so hard to please.

“Of course we would.”

“How did it happen? When!?”

Even if he asks that, since I’m not Julia, I can’t understand how her feelings changed. But I remember my own feelings clearly, as though I had recorded a journal solemnly every day, the impressions burned deep into my mind.

How the rookie officer von Grantz Adalbert fell in love with Suzanna Julia.

“The reason I fell in love with her...”

Since Julia couldn't see, she used all her body's senses to eat. She would bring the bowl in front of her to savor the aroma, use her cheeks and forehead to feel the rising steam, use her hands to touch the soup and determine the texture of the food, and then she would use the silver spoon to lightly tap it apart, Her movements were very light, but completely unhesitant.

That day I used a method I just learned to make my first dish, the ingredients being large, hard shellfish and white fish meat. The Wincott area was really far from the seaside, so they wouldn't eat anything without cooking it properly first.

“It smells so good! Goodness~~ I feel it's such a waste that you became a soldier.”

As usual, Julia used her entire body to taste the food. When her white finger touched the steaming hot bowl, that instant when the brown soup dirties her—maybe she couldn't resist the fragrant food, or maybe it was an accidental action.

That was the moment I fell in love with Suzanna Julia.

“She actually ate it with her hands, even pinching the food with her fingers, like a child with bad manners. But when she was drinking the soup, she immediately realized that her actions were unbecoming a lady. At first I thought she would be embarrassed, but instead she held her stomach and laughed. As she was laughing she worried that the fish would go cold, so she still pinched it with her fingers for her second bite. And to match her, I picked up the piping hot shellfish with my hands too. Once I leave this castle, I live a rough military campaign life, so it wasn't strange at all for me to eat with my hands. But Julia was different, although she was manlier than I imagined, and strong with her fists and legs, she was still the precious princess of the Wincott family, so she can't do something as rude as eating with her hands in front of her father.”

Suzanna Julia cleaned off everything on the plate, and then laughed heartily as she said,

“How annoying, Adalbert. I only get like this when I’m eating with you, y’know!”

“It’s better that way. If you were to act like this in front of your father, he might choke on a prawn.”

“That’s right. Speaking of my father, he’s already arranged my marriage for me.”

I asked, “You’re already at a marriageable age, huh?”

Because I was only a soldier, still wet behind the ears, and Julia was even younger than me, to me engagements and marriages were all very far away. But some aristocrats treat marriage as a method to strengthen relationships, those marriages have nothing to do with age.

But she seems to be against that method too, shaking her head with her mouth shut,

“No, I’m not at that age yet. My majutsu and martial arts aren’t mature enough yet, even if I enlist I wouldn’t be an independent soldier. So I told Father, I think marriage and love are still too early for me as I am now. Even if I will reach that stage eventually, I have long since had a partner in my heart.”

Just a while before that, in that moment just a few breaths earlier, I had fallen in love with Suzanna Julia, so I felt a little dejected as I asked instinctively,

“Who is it?”

“Who’s there--!”

A bucket and cursing fly at me at the same time.

The inn’s lady owner is standing at the door furiously, her right hand fiercely brandishing a machete.

She thought that it had gotten quiet downstairs, so she came down to see the situation, only to smell cooking from the kitchen, as well as sounds of conversation. Just as she thought it shouldn’t be robbers, her fury finally

explodes—

“Hi~~ Lady owner, sorry to frighten you. This guy here is my comrade...”

“Get the hell out of here--!”

Hey, hold on a sec! You want to chase us out into the rain in the middle of the night!?

Nigel and I don't have the time to protest before we're chased out the back door, my sword and little luggage thrown out behind us. I haven't sobered yet, so I don't have the strength to debate with a human gone berserk, all I can do is just sit in the mud with a silly smile.

From the moment I saw this guy, the laughter I've been accumulating for so long starts acting up again. That's a laughter you only hear from ten-year-old children, geez.

Weathering the rain, Maxine bends down and asks, looking at my face,

“How did that woman reply?”

“I forgot what she said. Anyway that was a long time ago.”

The truth is I haven't forgotten, I think I'll never forget until the moment I die. Looking surprised, she had said--

“You, of course.”